

THE NORTH LANDING SCENIC RIVER SYSTEM REPORT

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THE NORTH LANDING RIVER BASIN OF VIRGINIA BEACH:

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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To accompany "The North Landing River Scenic
River System" report to the Governor and General Assembly

Jeffrey M. O'Dell
Division of Historic Landmarks
Department of Conservation and Historic Resources
Commonwealth of Virginia

January 22, 1988

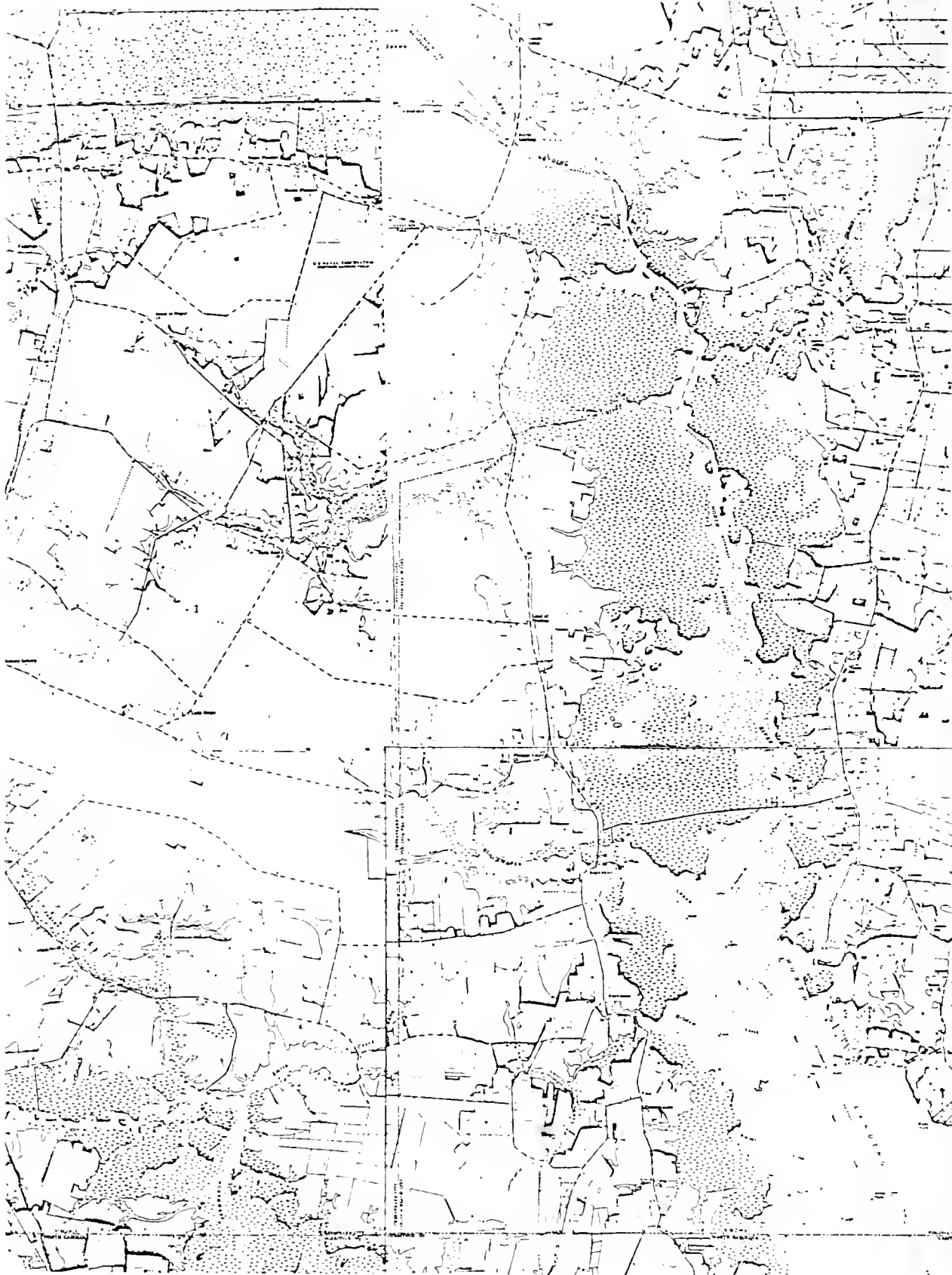


Fig. 1 USGS Maps. The study area: the North Landing River (south of Indian River Road) and its tributaries (Milldam Creek, Blackwater Creek, Pocaty River and West Neck Creek). Created from sections of four USGS quad maps (clockwise from upper left the quads are: Fentress, Pleasant Ridge, Creeds, Moycock).

THE NORTH LANDING RIVER BASIN OF VIRGINIA BEACH:
A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Note: A fully footnoted version of this report is available from the Division of Historic Landmarks, 221 Governor Street, Richmond, VA 23219, (804) 786-3143.

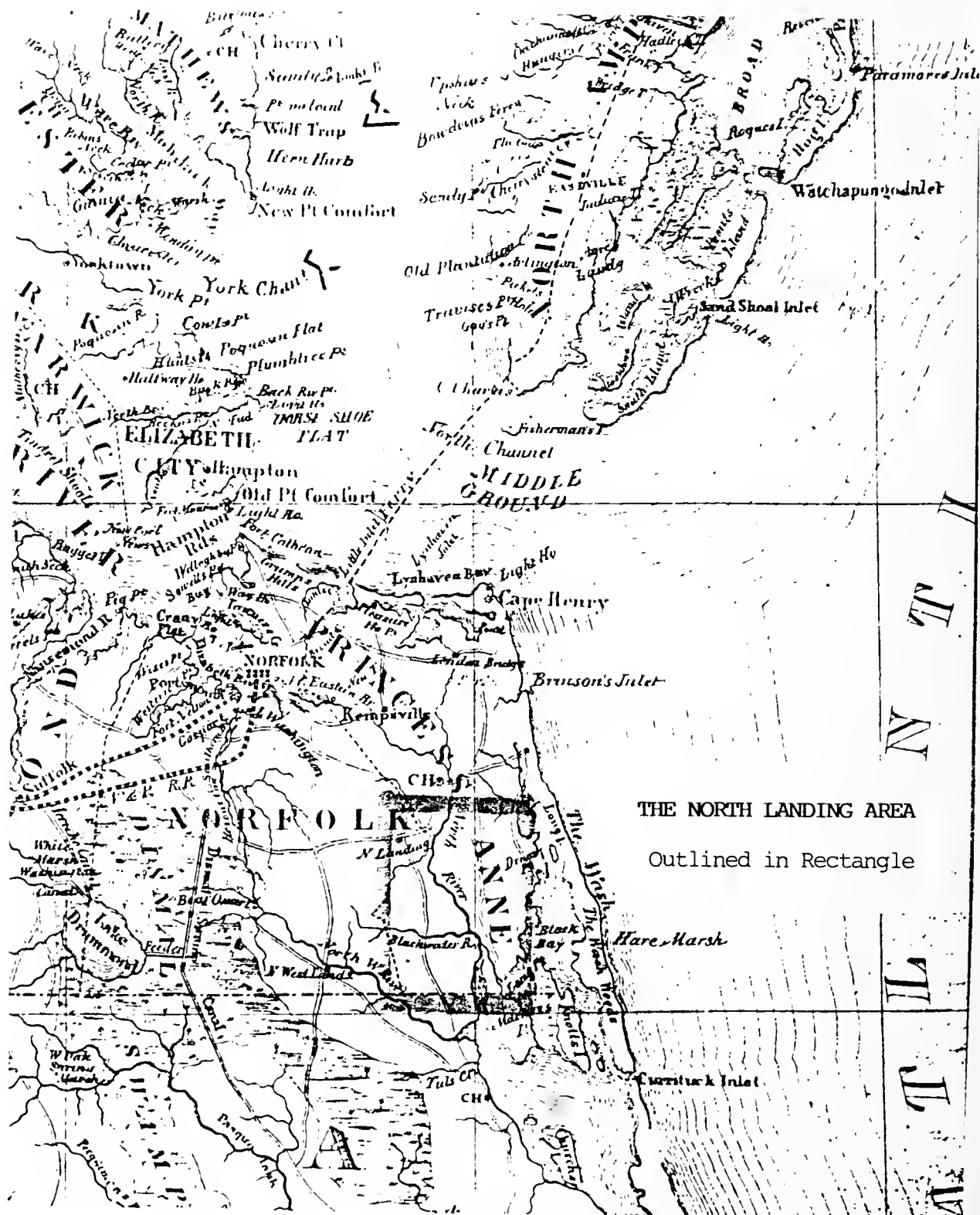


Fig. 2. The North Landing area is highlighted in rectangle superimposed on an 1855 map of Virginia by Claudius Crozet. The North Landing River is designated here as the "North River." The hamlet of North Landing is labeled on the map, as is the Blackwater River and Back Bay (the latter is incorrectly indicated as "Black Bay").

Prehistory and European Contact

The North Landing River basin in southwest Virginia Beach has been inhabited periodically for at least 11,000 years. The first known settlers were hunter-gatherers, descendants of peoples who crossed the former land bridge between Siberia and Alaska during the last ice age. Archaeological evidence shows that a wide variety of Native American cultural groups lived in the North Landing area from the period between 9,500 B.C. and 1600 A.D. With ample supplies of fish and game in its forests and marshy waterways, the region continually attracted small groups of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. Native Americans began practicing agriculture in the area around 1000 A.D. When the first Europeans arrived in Virginia in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, they found Algonquin-speaking tribes living in villages and raising corn, squash and beans.

The Indians living in the Virginia Beach area at the time of contact with the Jamestown colonists were known to the English as Chesapeans. Then part of the larger Powhatan Chiefdom stretching from the James to the Potomac River valleys, their main village, Chesepioc, stood near the mouth of the Lynnhaven River. The Chesapeans' territory stretched roughly from the Chesapeake Bay on the north to the Elizabeth River on the west and Currituck Sound on the south.

Ralph Lane, governor of the Roanoke Colony of 1585-86, was the first European to record the Chesapeans. On a long march north of Roanoke Island, he and his men encountered several Chesapean villages. In a report to Sir Walter Raleigh, Lane described the Chesapeans' habitat in glowing terms:

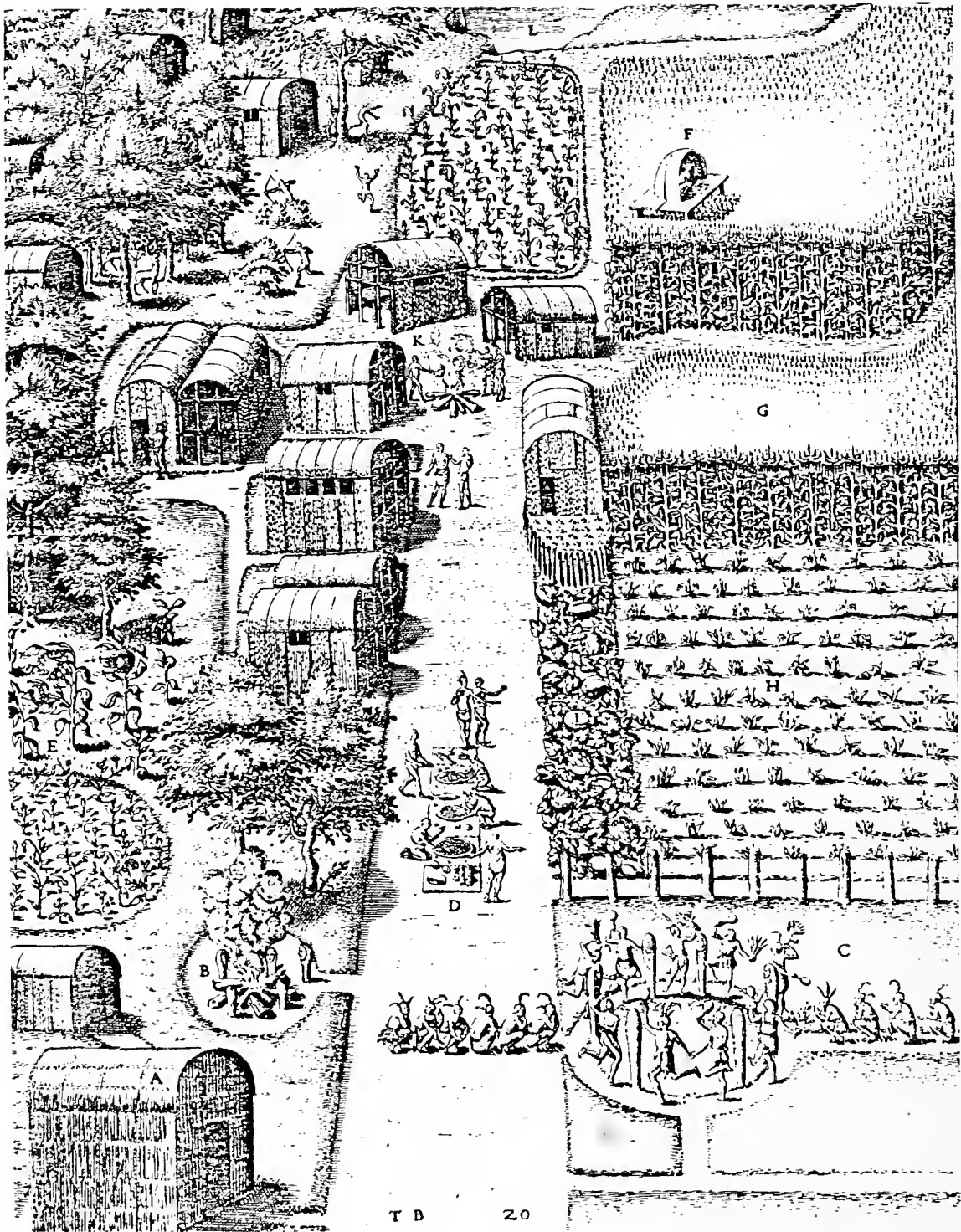


Fig. 3. An Algonquin village in northeastern North Carolina. This 1590 engraving by Theodore DeBry was based on an original watercolor by John White of the Roanoke Island expedition. The village depicted here is similar to ones inhabited by the Chesapeans of the North Landing area.

...The Territorie and soyle of the Chesepeians...was for pleasantness of seate, for temperature of Climate, for fertilitie of soyle, and for the commoditie of the Sea, besides multitude of Beares (being an excellent good victual) with good woods of Sassafras and Wallnut trees, is not to be excelled by any other whatsoever.

The famous drawings by John White depicting the natives of the Roanoke Island area provide a reasonably accurate image of the people living in the North Landing region at that time. Chesapean villages were composed of ten or more dwellings set close together in a clearing, surrounded by crops. Houses were rectangular, with arched roofs, and consisted of a framework of bent and tied saplings covered with woven mats that could be rolled up at the sides to admit light and air.

Chesapean society was organized much like that of other Algonquin-speaking tribes in eastern Virginia. The chief of each tribal unit called a werowance, exercised the power of life and death over his subjects. Male priests served as advisors to the werowance, suggesting where to fish and hunt and when to plant and harvest, as well as warning of events such as storms and hurricanes, or the attacks of other tribes. These priests or "conjurers" also officiated at ceremonies and served as healers to the tribe.

Men and women followed clearly defined roles. Men fished and hunted, cleared the fields, manufactured tools and canoes, and constructed houses. Women planted, tended and harvested the crops, and gathered wild foods such as fruits and shellfish. Women also prepared the food, repaired the dwelling, and reared the children. Working longer hours than the men, they made a wide variety of utilitarian objects ranging from clothing and skins to woven mats, baskets and pottery.

By most standards, the Chesapeans were well housed and fed, living in harmony with their environment. They were, at least in their domestic lives, a gentle and moderate people, no doubt much like the Roanoke Indians described by Thomas Harriot in 1590: "They are verye sober...and consequentlve verve longe lived because they doe not oppress nature."

At the time of first European contact, the Chesapeans were a large and independent tribe. However about 1595, Powhatan, the ambitious ruler of a territory encompassing all of tidewater Virginia between the James and Potomac rivers, set his sights on the Chesapeans. Sending a supposedly friendly delegation of warriors to Chesepioc, he had all the men massacred in their sleep, sparing only women and children. Powhatan depopulated other Chesapean villages as well, and by the time the Jamestown colonists arrived in 1607 the tribe was seriously weakened. In the following decades tribal members offered little or no resistance to the English settlers who gradually appropriated their lands.

Colonial Development

The area now defined as southwestern Virginia Beach remained largely untouched by Europeans until some half-century after the first party of Englishman led by Captain Christopher Newport landed near Cape Henry on April 26, 1607. The first permanent English inhabitants of the area settled at the mouth of the Lynnhaven River in northern Virginia Beach in the 1620s. By the 1650s the courthouse village of Lymhaven, situated between the east and west branches of the Elizabeth River, had become the social and political focal point of the region. In the second half of the 17th century, English settlers began to move into the lower

half of the present city, which had by then been largely vacated by its native inhabitants.

Established in 1634, the first political unit in the area was called Elizabeth City. Four years later, southern Hampton Roads fell within the jurisdiction of newly-created Lower Norfolk County. In 1691, Lower Norfolk was divided into Norfolk County (the present City of Chesapeake) and Princess Anne County, which comprised the entire area now known as the City of Virginia Beach, extending to the North Carolina border. The courthouse for the region moved four times over the course of two centuries. The third courthouse, erected in 1751, stood at the now-extinct community of New Town on the Lynnhaven River. In 1788 it moved to the then thriving port town of Kempsville, situated on the North Landing River some ten miles upstream from North Landing. The final move took place in 1824, when the courthouse was moved to the geographical center of the county. Known as Princess Anne Courthouse, this small community is located on the west bank of West Neck Creek about a mile north of the designated Scenic River area.

Settlement in the southern part of the county, around the North Landing River basin, was gradual. The earliest land patents, taken out in the 1620s and 30s, were probably not seated until at least a decade or two later. Court records reveal that the Currituck Sound area was attracting permanent settlers as early as the 1650s, some of whom made their livelihood by smuggling goods through the Old Currituck Inlet. Two decades later, New England whaling ships were making occasional stops at Back Bay.

By that time a continuous road system linked the more thickly settled northern parts of the county with its southernmost tip at Knotts Island. One of the region's oldest major roads ran generally along the route of present Oceana Boulevard, joining Princess Anne Road at Nimmo Church, then running south to the Carolina border. Roads also led east and west, as is shown by a 1683 court order seeking to repair severe storm damage. The court instructed the "inhabitants of Blackwater [to]...Cleare these roads, and make bridges where they...Require...especially the road...to Machopongo [modern Pungo]." While much of the North Landing region consisted of swampland, low ground was interspersed with rich farmland, and this continued to draw settlers. By the late 17th century the area was sufficiently well settled to require a constable for both the Currituck and Blackwater districts.

Seventeenth- and 18th-century maps show no sizable communities in the North Landing basin. There, as elsewhere in tidewater Virginia, most of the colonial population lived and worked on tobacco plantations of varying size. Both big and small farms were largely self-sustaining, producing their own food and other necessities. Social life revolved around the immediate rural neighborhood, varied by periodic visits to church, court and marketplace.

Tobacco remained the principal cash crop until the 1760s, when wheat began to supplement it. Some Princess Anne County farmers also grew commercial quantities of flax, used in making linseed oil and linen. Corn was grown by all farmers for their own use, and by the late 18th century, for shipment to New England. The region's extensive evergreen forests produced other cash crops, including high-quality lumber and shingles of pine, cedar and cypress. Lengthy pine

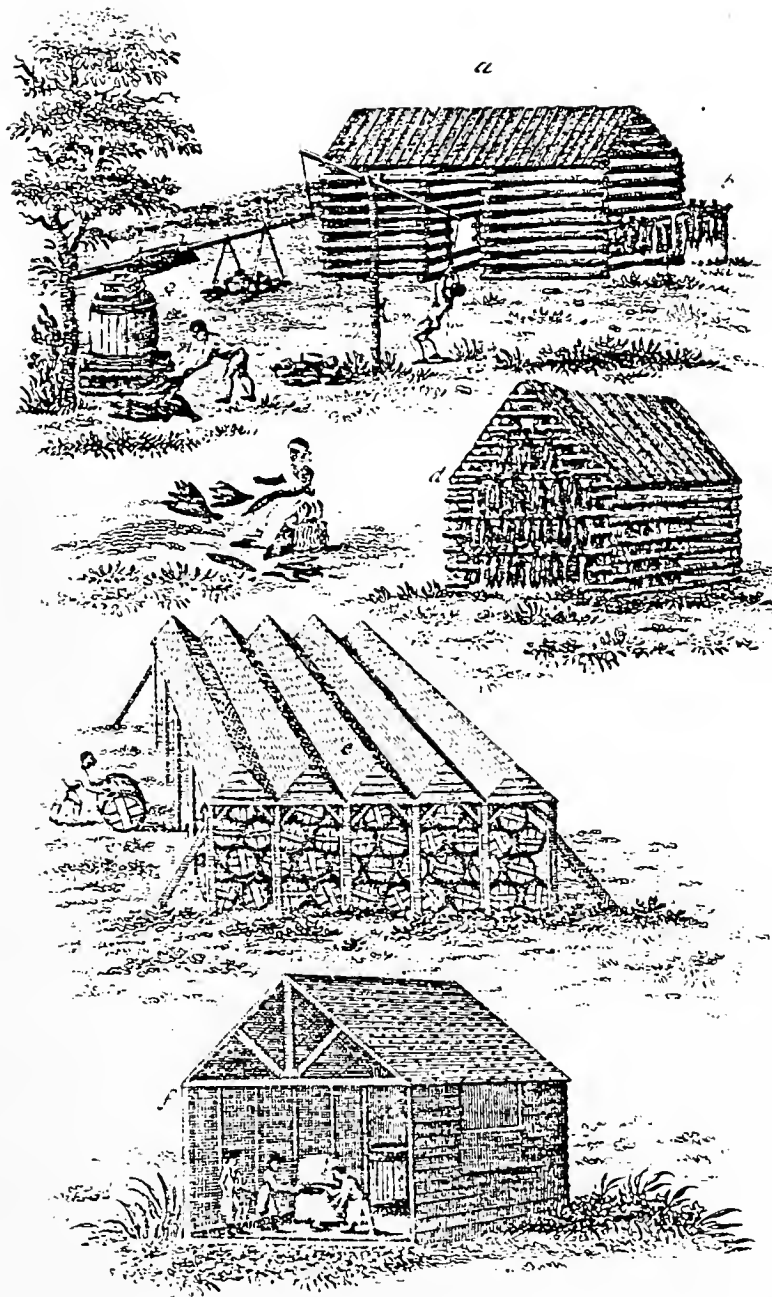


Fig. 4. An illustration from Tatham's Historical and Practical Essay on ... Tobacco, showing (from top to bottom) the drying, packing, warehousing and inspecting of Virginia tobacco.

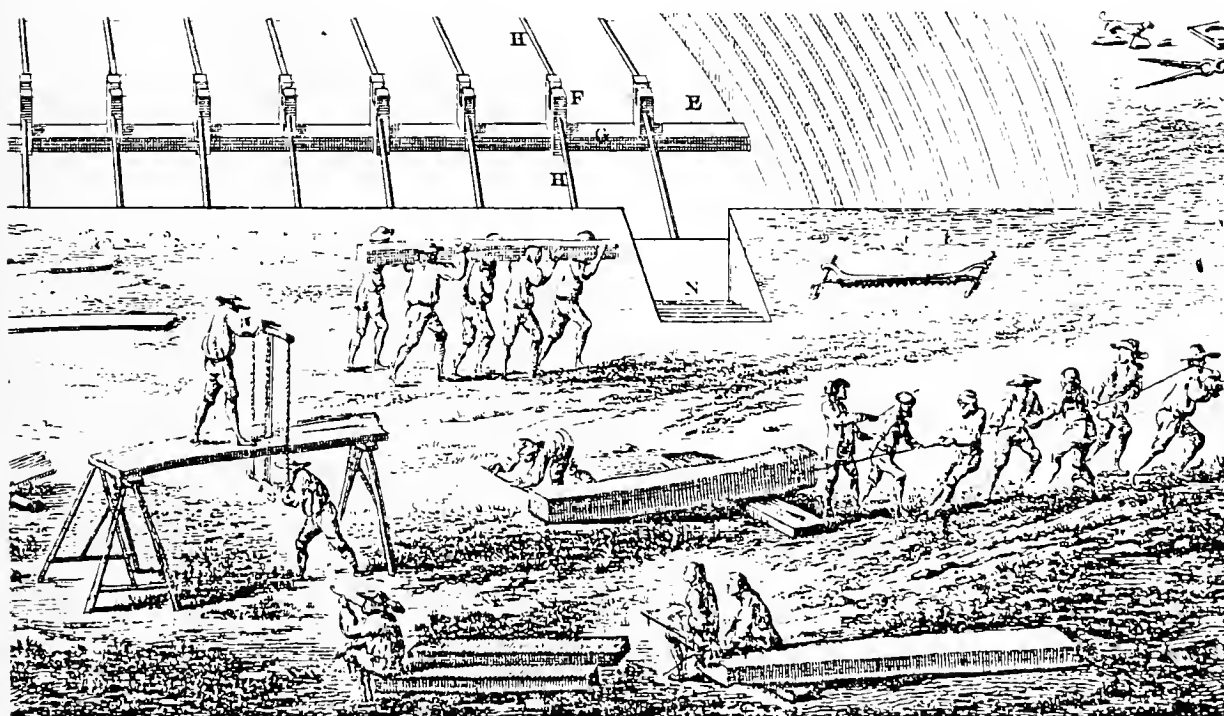
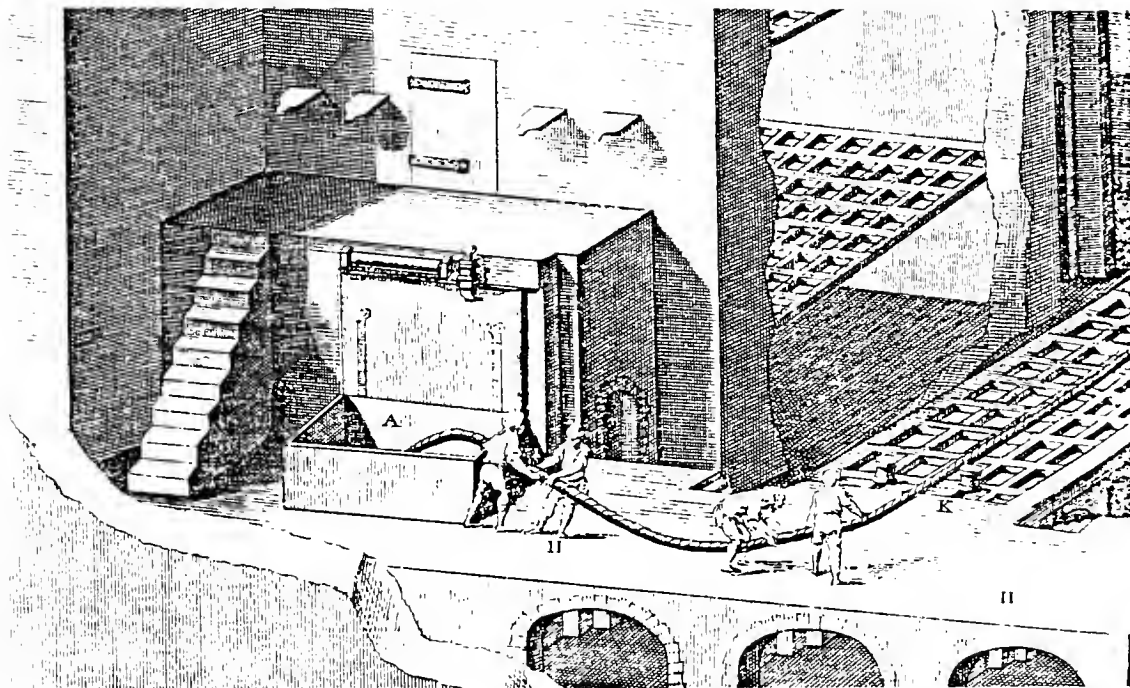
poles were in high demand by English and American shipbuilders for use as ships' masts, and tar and turpentine were produced in quantity for the building trades.

The importance of tar and pitch to the early economy of the region--especially the timbered lowlands of the North Landing River basin--is underscored in a 1704 letter from Virginia Governor Francis Nicholson to the London board of trade:

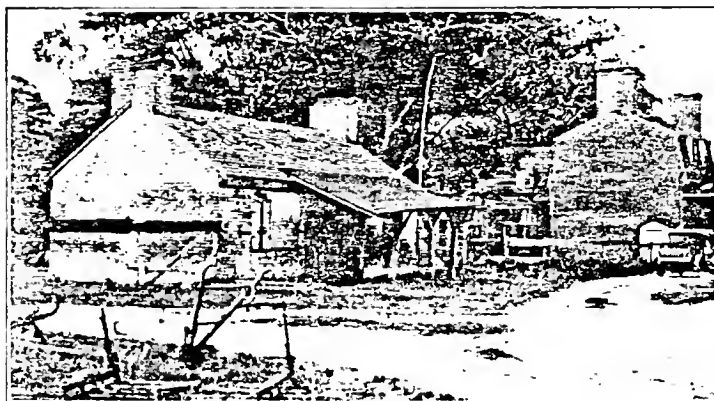
I believe there is annually made in Virginia near 3,000 barrells of tar in Princess Anne County, which contains 97,891 acres of patented and ... about 50,000 acres of low pine land not agreeable for growing tobacco. The small quantity [of tobacco] there made is of the worst steem and soe little value that [it] discourages the inhabitants to plant, and forces them to clothe and maintain themselves by manufacturing wool and leather and raising stocks of cattle & hogs. What tar is made is of the knotts and pieces of fallen trees...'Tis probable [that] treble the quality can be made out of growing trees in [Princess Anne and Norfolk] counties & it would be much better...for all uses [than]...planting tobacco.

Nicholson also pointed out that the locals made use of tar for painting and sealing their houses and boats, and that the tar was sold to ship masters carrying it to Barbados, Jamaica and the Leeward Islands.

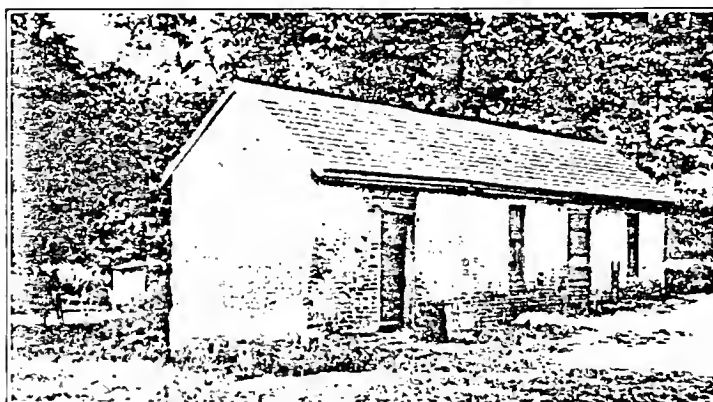
In the 18th century, farmers in the northern part of Princess Anne County sent crops up the Lynnhaven or Elizabeth rivers to Norfolk. Farmers in the southern part of the county found transportation much less convenient, since goods had either to be carted overland, or shipped by boat up the North Landing River and then by road to Norfolk. This drawback, together with the swampiness of much of the southern part of the county and its attendant malarial danger, made the North Landing region less attractive than northern Princess Anne. Thus, by and large, farms in the southern part of the county were smaller than those in the north.



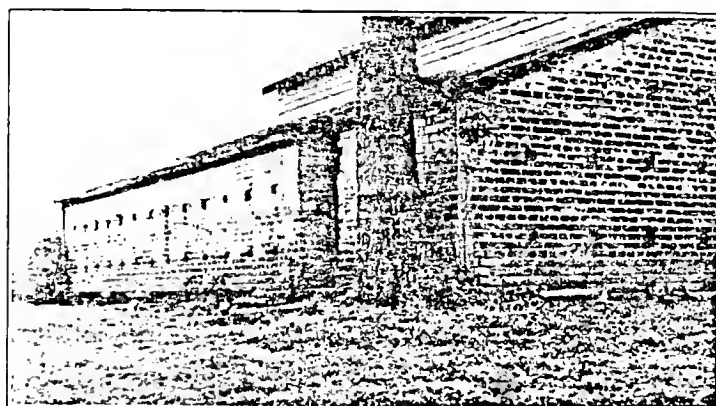
Figs. 5 and 6. Top: Workers tarring rope for shipbuilding. From an engraving in Denis Diderot's 1779 *L'Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers*, showing method used in a French factory. Bottom: Preparing lumber for shipbuilding, in another engraving from Diderot. Lumber from southeastern Virginia was shipped overseas as well as to shipyards in nearby Norfolk. On the left in the illustration are two men ripsawing boards, a laborious but common method of sawing lumber in Virginia from the 17th through early 19th centuries.



Quarter kitchen and end of Manor House of Richard Murray



Smokehouse and roothouse on Murray Plantation



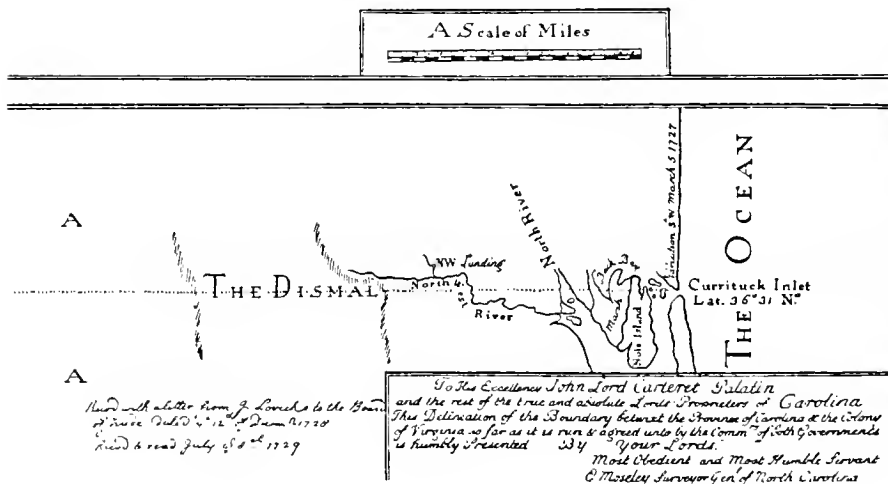
Flax drying house on Murray Plantation

Fig. 7. Unusually substantial brick outbuildings on an 18th-century plantation illustrated in Kellam's Old Houses of Princess Anne, Virginia. The main plantation house, with gambrel roof, is visible in the top photo. At bottom is a building believed to have been used for flax drying. Though not as important as tobacco, flax was a significant secondary commercial crop for many county farmers in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Perhaps the earliest account of southeastern Virginia, including the North Landing area, was written by William Byrd of Westover in 1728. Arguably the best American writer of his day, Byrd penned a graphic account of the eight-month expedition to establish a boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. Byrd and his survey party set off from Norfolk in February 1728. From there they proceeded to Knott's Island at the northern end of Currituck Sound, moving gradually westward across the North Landing River toward the Dismal Swamp and beyond. Byrd's narrative suggests that the living conditions of many settlers in the area were primitive compared to those living further north along Virginia's major tidal rivers.

In his travels through the region, Byrd encountered a wide range of backwoods denizens, from small plantation owners to trappers, squatters and runaway slaves. He took greatest delight in describing picturesque characters like the settler near the Northwest River who was "lately removed bag and baggage from Maryland." The man, who lived in a "miserable cottage" in the woods, was apparently fleeing debts accumulated in his home state. Byrd writes that "For want of our tent, we were obliged to shelter ourselves in this wretched hovel, where we were almost devoured by vermin of various kinds". Further east, near the mouth of the North Landing River, Byrd and his party met "a marooner that modestly called himself a hermit, though he forfeited that name by suffering a wanton female to cohabit with him. His habitation was a bower covered with bark after the Indian fashion.... Like the ravens, he neither plowed nor sowed, but subsisted chiefly upon oysters, which his handmaid made a shift to gather from the adjacent rocks."

To the west of the North Landing River, in what is now North Carolina, Byrd described the typical dwellings of the area:



Figs. 8 and 9. Top: An 1850s engraving by David Strother of a backwoods cabin in western Virginia. Such crude dwellings were probably common in the poorer and more remote areas of the North Landing region until the second half of the 19th century. No illustrations of this class of dwellings exist from the 17th or 18th centuries, but this cabin was probably not dissimilar to ones Byrd described in his 1728 History of the Dividing Line. Bottom: 1729 surveyor's map of the Virginia-North Carolina border based on William Byrd's dividing line expedition of 1728. The "North River" (North Landing River) and Northwest River are both labeled on the map.

Most of the houses in this part of the country are log houses, covered with pine or cypress shingles, three feet long and one broad. They are hung upon lathes with pegs, and their doors too turn upon wooden hinges and have wooden locks to secure them, so that the building is finished without nails or other iron work.

Like most farmhouses in colonial Virginia, these modest log dwellings probably contained only one or two rooms with a loft above. Dwellings on bigger tracts in the more settled and prosperous areas of Princess Anne County were probably more often of traditional English heavy-timber framed construction, but they too were small by today's standards, seldom containing more than two to four rooms. Many timber or log houses were erected without foundations or sills, and some framed houses were built on posts set directly into the ground. Because of their insubstantial construction, together with the warm, moist climate and constant threat of termites, no colonial houses of this type are known to survive in southeastern Virginia.

The relative poverty of much of the North Landing River area in the 18th century can be explained by its inaccessibility. Byrd writes, "The neck of land included betwixt North River and Northwest River...belonged formerly to Governor Gibbs....It would be a valuable tract of land [were it not for its location] where, for want of navigation and commerce, the best estate affords little more than a coarse subsistence." He continues:

We observed very few cornfields in our walks and those very small, which seemed the stranger to us because we could see no other tokens of husbandry or improvement. But upon further inquiry we were given to understand people only made corn for themselves and are not for their stocks, which know very well how to get their own living. Both cattle and hogs ramble into the neighboring marshes and swamps, where they maintain themselves the whole winter long and are not fetched home till the spring.

A constant theme in Byrd's description of the area was its backwardness. As an energetic and ingenious entrepreneur, a model product of the Enlightenment, Byrd

was constantly irritated by what he considered indolence among the natives. He reiterates this theme in the following passage, also pointing out the self-sufficient character of the area's economy and the division of labor between the sexes.

From thence we marched in good order along the east side of the Dismal and passed the long bridge that lies over the south branch of Elizabeth River. At the end of eighteen miles we reached Timothy Ivy's plantation, where we pitched our tent for the first time and were furnished with everything the place afforded. We perceived the happy effects of industry in this family, in which every one looked tidy and clean and carried in their countenances the cheerful marks of plenty. We saw no drones there, which are but too common, alas, in that part of the world. Though, in truth, the distemper of laziness seizes the men oftener much than the women. These last spin, weave, and knit, all with their own hands, while their husbands depending on the bounty of the climate, are slothful in everything but getting of children, and in that only instance make themselves useful members of an infant colony.

Byrd, like other commentators, found the inhabitants of the tidewater hinterlands for the most part an irreligious lot. But in the more settled areas of Princess Anne several Anglican churches drew the area's scattered farm families for weekly or monthly services and socializing. The earliest house of worship known to have stood in the North Landing area was the Third Eastern Shore Chapel, near Pungo, built in 1754.

Bound up with the local and imperial political structure, the Church of England never attracted a large or ardent following among colonial Virginians. Beginning in the 1740s, however, a surge of religious interest characterized as the Great Awakening stirred people to join dissenting sects, most notably the Methodists and Baptists.

A small number of Quakers and Presbyterians had lived in the county since the 17th century, but no congregations are known to have been founded in the North Landing

area. The religious and social landscape had begun to change, however, by 1762, when county Baptists founded their first congregation at Pungo, along West Neck Creek. Methodists built Nimmo Church near Princess Anne Courthouse in 1791. Many churches, mainly Baptist and Methodist, sprang up in the southwest part of the county in the 19th century. Early congregations still functioning in the North Landing basin today include those of Beech Grove, Bethel, Bethlehem, Blackwater, Butts Road, Cava, Camels Chapel, Kala, Oak Grove, Piney Grove, Pleasant Ridge, Pleasant Valley, and Princess Anne.

The Revolution and Early Republic

The same egalitarian sentiment that fueled the Great Awakening in Virginia during the mid-18th century fanned the flames of revolution in the 1770s. What many consider to be the first battle of the war in Virginia was fought at nearby Kempsville on November 6, 1775, and a larger pitched battle took place at Great Bridge on December 9 of that year. While no battles were fought in southern Princess Anne, local residents marched off to war in other parts of the state and country. Those remaining at home sometimes experienced severe privation as requisitions by the Continental Army depleted farm stocks. British merchants fled Norfolk in 1775 and 1776, bringing regional trade to a standstill, and British troops occupied the city in the winter of 1780-81. In August of 1781, however, a decisive naval battle between French and British forces in the waters off nearby Cape Henry led directly to the Allied victory at Yorktown.

Following the war, population in the North Landing region, as elsewhere in Virginia, continued to grow. Prosperity fluctuated with the agricultural markets, but generally the standard of living rose for most farm families.

Slaves made up a relatively small part of the population in the 18th century; in fact at mid-century Princess Anne had the third lowest per capita slave population in tidewater Virginia. By the Revolution, about a third of all landholders in the southern part of the county owned slaves, but less than ten percent had more than two slaves. The largest slaveholder in southern Princess Anne, with nineteen slaves, was John Ackiss. (This may be compared with other tidewater counties, where the largest landowners commonly directed a population fifty to a hundred or more slaves.) The black population of Princess Anne did rise considerably, however, in the late 18th and early 19th century, and by 1860 blacks comprised about 40 percent of the county's overall population, though the percentage was undoubtedly lower in the North Landing area. In addition, a small number of free blacks farmed their own parcels and worked as craftsmen in the region during the antebellum period.

The North Landing region's increased population and prosperity in the late 18th century and first half of the 19th century is reflected in its surviving farmhouses. While architectural surveys for the area are incomplete, at least seven farmhouses along the North Landing River and its major tributaries are known to date between 1790 and 1820. (Apparently no colonial houses survived in this area of the county, though several stand in northern Virginia Beach.) The Federal period apparently witnessed a major rebuilding in eastern Virginia, one in which the landscape of small, often poorly built colonial buildings was replaced by one



- Late colonial or Federal period farmhouses in the West
- Relatively large and well-built for their time, they
- ng types used by the upper 5 or 10 percent of the
- The Old Fentress House is a gambrel-roofed structure with
- and rear lean-to. An early kitchen/quarters stands at the
- Anthony Fentress House is two-story brick and
- wings and porch.



Figs. 12 and 13. Two representative Federal period houses in the North Landing area. Top: The Ives House, on the North Landing River, has a typical side-passage, two-room-deep floorplan with double chimneys. (1987 photo). Bottom: The Fountain House, on West Neck Creek, features a hall-parlor floorplan; its two-story height is unusual for this early period. (1972 photo).

characterized by larger and more stylish dwellings and better-built outbuildings and farm structures. Popular house forms of this period include 1½-story, one-room-deep, gambrel-roofed dwellings like the Anthony Fentress House near Creeds and Whitehurst's near the courthouse. As elsewhere in tidewater, such houses were commonly built on either a traditional hall-parlor plan or central-passage plan. Another widespread house form was the two-story, two-room-deep gable-roofed house built on a side-passage plan. Like the vast majority of better-built houses in the area, all local examples are of heavy-timber frame construction sheathed with weatherboards.

Unfortunately, these remaining large houses give a biased view of the actual 18th- and 19th-century landscape, which was characterized by small two- or three-room dwellings of log, frame, or post-in-the-ground construction. Few if any houses of this type have survived in the North Landing area. However, several antebellum houses in the area retain early outbuildings. These include detached kitchens, which probably also functioned as dwellings for house servants. Early kitchen quarters buildings stand at four farms in the West Neck Creek area.

The Creation of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal

During the second half of the 19th century, the history of the North Landing River was intimately linked with that of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. Chartered in 1850 and opened to traffic in 1859, the canal linked the Albemarle Sound area of North Carolina with the port of Norfolk, augmenting and later supplanting the earlier Dismal Swamp Canal, which ran on a north-south course about fifteen miles west of the North Landing River. The ACC might be more properly termed a navigation system than a canal, since only a small part of it included a

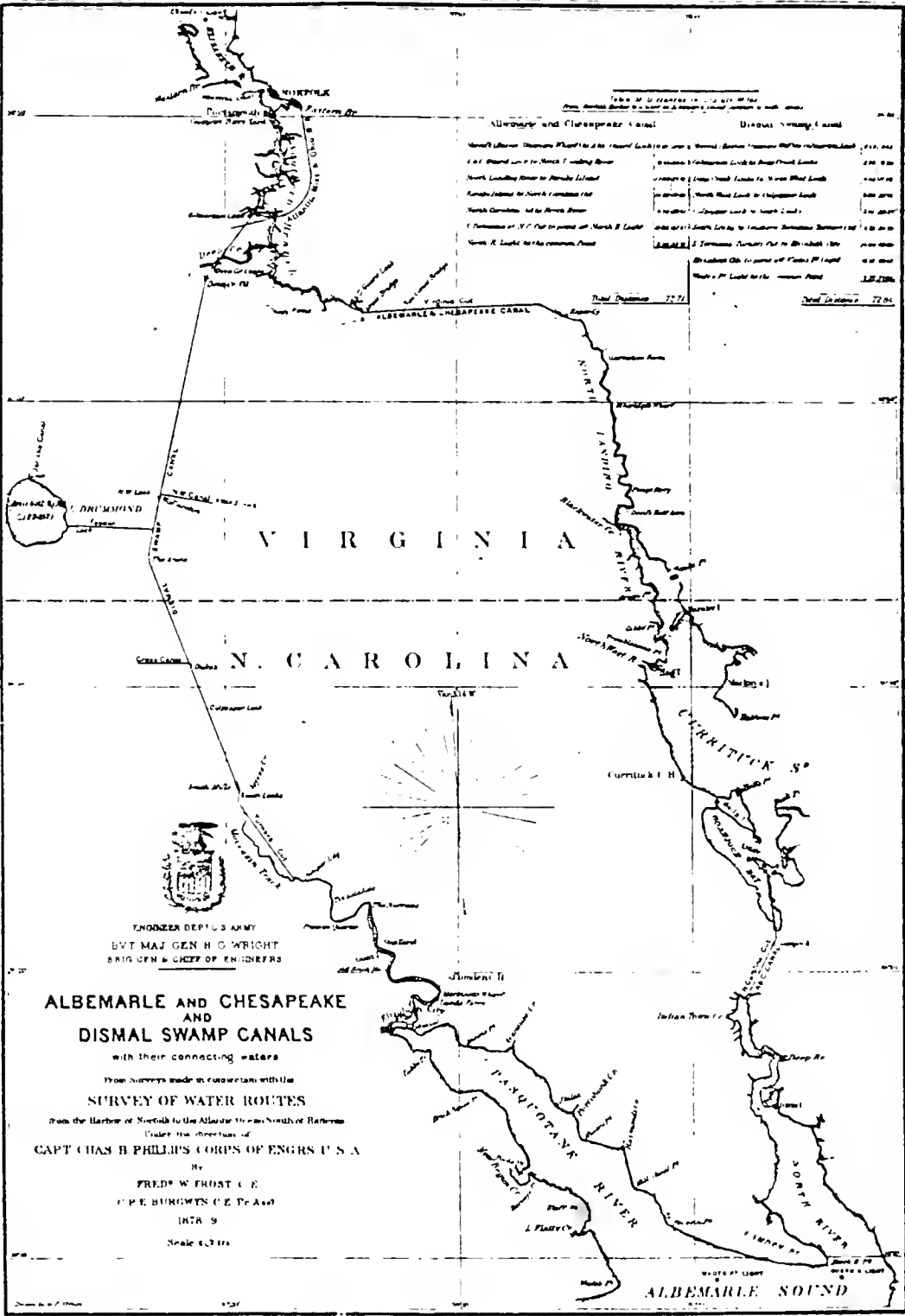


Fig. 14. Frederick W. Frost map of 1878-79, showing the Albemarle and Chesapeake (on right) and Dismal Swamp Canal (on left). The ACC began at Norfolk and continued southeast along the East Branch of the Elizabeth River, following the "Virginia Cut" directly east for 9 miles, then following the North Landing River south to Currituck Sound. A second, shorter cut, the "North Carolina Cut," gave access to the North River and Albemarle Sound to the south.

man-made cut or ditch. Most of its Virginia length consisted of a dredged channel coursing along the North Landing River, a stretch of over twenty miles. Altogether 73 miles in length, this navigation system continues in use today as part of the federally operated Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

Boats entered the northern end of the waterway at Hampton Roads, moving up the South Branch of the Elizabeth River. A nine-mile cut ran directly east from the South Branch to the upper reaches of the North Landing River, near a road crossing and wharf still known as North Landing. (The North Landing River, also known as the North River on some 18th- and 19th-century maps, is not to be confused with the larger North River in North Carolina, a tributary of Albemarle Sound, and southern link in the ACC.) Boats proceeded through the Virginia Cut via a gigantic two-way guard lock at Great Bridge. (This, at the time of its construction, was the second-largest lock in North America.) Emerging from the straight, nine-mile-long cut, boats headed down the twisting North Landing River, crossing the North Carolina border before entering landlocked Currituck Sound. The 5½-mile Carolina Cut at Coinjock Bay let boats pass south into the North River, a tributary of Albemarle Sound. Within the sound, boats had direct access to the port towns of Edenton, New Bern and Elizabeth City.

The Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal was built mainly to improve trade to and from northeastern North Carolina, since topography blocked this region's access to the sea. Only shallow-draft vessels could negotiate the treacherous shallow inlets piercing the Atlantic barrier islands, and thus barred from the direct coastal and international trade, local farmers were obliged to send their produce at much greater expense by poorly maintained overland routes to Norfolk, the closest deepwater port.

The Dismal Swamp Canal, the nation's first, had already solved part of this problem long before work began on the ACC. Built in the 1790s with the main object of floating timber out of the Dismal Swamp, improvements made to the canal by the 1820s had created a direct route between Elizabeth City, North Carolina and the ports of Hampton Roads. The DSC, however, was regularly plagued by low water. Being relatively shallow, the canal with its numerous locks made travel between Carolina and Norfolk painfully slow.

For this and other reasons, the private Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Company was chartered in 1850 to provide a quicker, wider and deeper route to the rich hinterlands of Carolina. The ACC provided direct competition to the DSC, largely supplanting the older canal for all but the shipment of local commodities, principally timber.

The idea of building a canal along the approximate route of the ACC was first voiced over a century earlier. In his History of the Dividing Line, William Byrd II called attention to "the advantage of making a channel to transport by water-carriage goods from Albemarle Sound into Nansemond and Elizabeth Rivers, in Virginia." Nothing concrete came of Byrd's suggestion until 1772, when Virginia's colonial assembly passed a comprehensive canals bill that included "provision for opening a canal from the head of the southern or eastern branch of Elizabeth River, to the head of the north [Landing] river." The route was surveyed and a report drawn up, but in 1775 war put an end to further consideration of the scheme.

The cause was resurrected at the Virginia Assembly of 1783 in Richmond. Implementation was slow, however, and meanwhile interest mounted in building a

more westerly canal that would lead directly into the Dismal Swamp and thence to the Pasquotank River and Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. Due partly to the strong advocacy of George Washington, who owned several thousand acres of prime timbered swampland, the Dismal Swamp Canal was officially chartered in 1787. The first leg of the canal was completed in 1805. While the DSC reduced the need for another canal following the previously proposed route via the North Landing River to Currituck Sound, the idea of a more easterly canal route did not die. Rather it was vigorously pursued by several individuals, including engineer and steamboat-inventor Robert Fulton, who made a personal survey of the Elizabeth River-North Landing River route. This same route was also endorsed by Thomas Jefferson's secretary of the treasury, Albert Gallatin. The Virginia Assembly favorably considered a Kempsville-North Landing route again in 1808, but the idea faded with the advent of the War of 1812.

After further studies, the earlier act was recast in 1815, creating the Great Bridge Canal Company. Once again, legislation failed to produce tangible results. Meanwhile, the Dismal Swamp Canal continued to be upgraded, and a good dirt road was built paralleling it.

In the 1840s a new but related canal scheme arose: one that would link Lynnhaven Bay to the North Landing River, thereby providing a direct link to Hampton Roads on the east or ocean side of Norfolk. Celebrated Virginia engineer Claudius Crozet carried out the necessary surveys for the Princess Anne and Kempsville Canal Company, chartered in 1840. Following numerous delays and several changes to its charter, the company was reincorporated as the Kempsville Canal Company in 1861. When the Civil War broke out, two of four canal cuts costing \$17,000 had already been completed. War halted the project, though, and it was never revived.

In the 1850s, after several decades of false starts, a water link to Albemarle Sound via the North Landing River finally saw fruition with the formation of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. The canal's prime booster and first president was engineer and entrepreneur Marshall Parks, Jr. (1820-1900).

Parks' father had served as superintendent and chief engineer of the Dismal Swamp Canal, and Parks junior had evidenced a keen interest in boats, canals and their attendant technology since early youth. At age 21, Parks assisted U. S. Navy Lt. William W. Hunter design a revolutionary (but ultimately unsuccessful) horizontal paddlewheel steamship. Parks was also responsible for the construction, in 1844, of an unusual iron steam vessel for New York's Novelty Iron Works. A few years later he designed the powerful steam dredges needed for excavating the difficult terrain of the ACC's Virginia Cut.

As a former official of the Dismal Swamp Company, Parks was acutely aware of the older waterway's deficiencies. These included the unreliability of its water level, the slowness of negotiating its many locks, and the difficulty of navigating around its flotillas of log rafts. These impediments often stretched the fifty-mile run between Norfolk and Elizabeth city to a week or more. Spurred by Park's advocacy of an Elizabeth River-North Landing River connection, the Virginia legislature incorporated the Great Bridge Lumber and Canal Company (predecessor of the ACC) in March 1850. A similar bill incorporating the Albemarle and Currituck Canal Company had been passed a few months earlier in North Carolina. Meanwhile, in the face of vested opposition, Parks vigorously promoted the idea of a continuous North Landing River-Currituck Sound route linking Norfolk and the port towns of Albemarle Sound. In 1854 he published a pamphlet in Raleigh disparaging the rival Dismal Swamp Canal and a proposed Ocracoke Inlet cut, at the




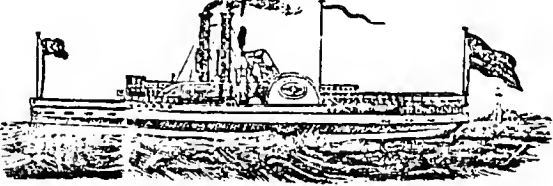
Fig. 15. The route of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal is shown clearly in relation to the entire Albemarle Sound region in this 1863 map. The route of the ACC is delineated by the dotted line on the right side of the map, a line intended to show the route taken by a federal gunboat during the Civil War.

Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Company.


INSTALLMENT

No. 4





Balance



Received of W. F. Baxter

of No. 4 the sum of Five Dollars.

as being a payment of Five Dollars for Share, on one Share of Stock held by him on the Capital Stock of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Company, late Great Ditch, Tunnel and Canal Company.

Dated at the Office of the Company, No. 34 West Main Street, Norfolk, 24 Feb 1857

Treasurer. Marshall Parks President.

PRINTED BY

Fig. 16. 1857 Stock certificate of the Albemarle and Canal Company. The certificate has been signed by Marshall Parks, president of the company.

same time boosting his own scheme. With public opinion on Park's side, the Raleigh legislature that same year endorsed his idea of creating a single company to integrate the Virginia and North Carolina canal efforts. The Virginia legislature followed North Carolina's lead in February 1856 by assenting to all the provisions of the Carolina act, and changing the corporation's name to the Albemarle and Chesapeake, the name it would carry for the next sixty years.

By this time construction had already begun on the Virginia Cut, planned to link the Elizabeth and North Landing rivers. The contractors were Courtright, Barton, who had signed an \$800,000 agreement with the canal company. Excavating the nine-mile Virginia Cut between Great Bridge and North Landing was an engineering feat made possible only by the use of specially-designed mobile steam dredges. Politician and agriculturist Edmund Ruffin described the operation after a visit to North Landing in 1856:

The excavation is effected entirely by steam-dredges of new construction, and great power. The one I saw in operation near North Landing was then in the most difficult ground, the very low swamp just above the bridge. The earth was barely above the water, and covered with heavy and thick swamp forest growth -- and beneath the surface, in the former channel of the choked river, were buried numerous sound stumps and trunks of cypress trees, which had been covered deeply by the slow accumulation of vegetable soil for the ages past. The cutting through and removal of this mass of living and dead (but sound) wood, imbedded in semi-fluid mire, and from beneath standing water, could scarcely have been effected at all, except by the wonderful machines in use, which derives aid from the presence of deep water, in which no hand-labor could effect anything.

Ruffin then provided a more detailed description of the dredges and their method of operation:

The dredging apparatus is in a vessel of fifty or sixty feet long, and is worked by a sixteen horse power steam-engine. There are seven of these dredging machines and vessels at the different places, and there will be built two more of greater size and power....[Though] obstructions may retard the progress of the work, nothing can effectually resist or defeat the monster ditcher. The thrusting out of the beam, its sundry changes of position suited to every required

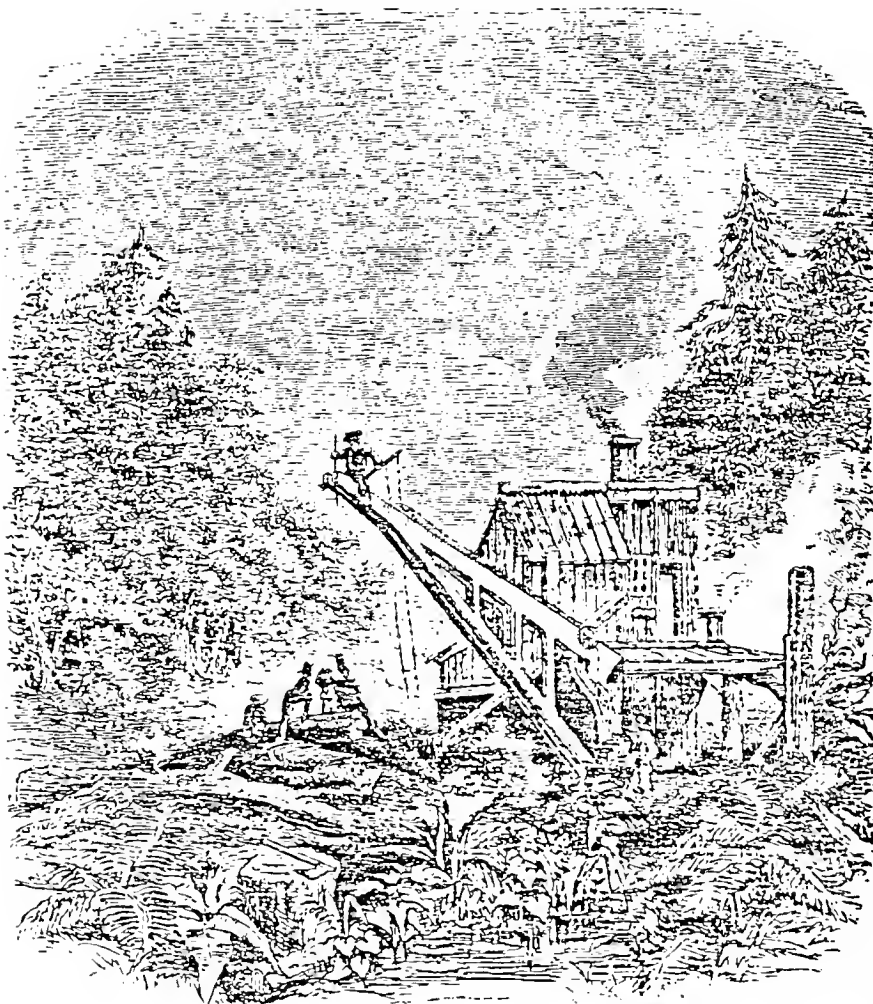


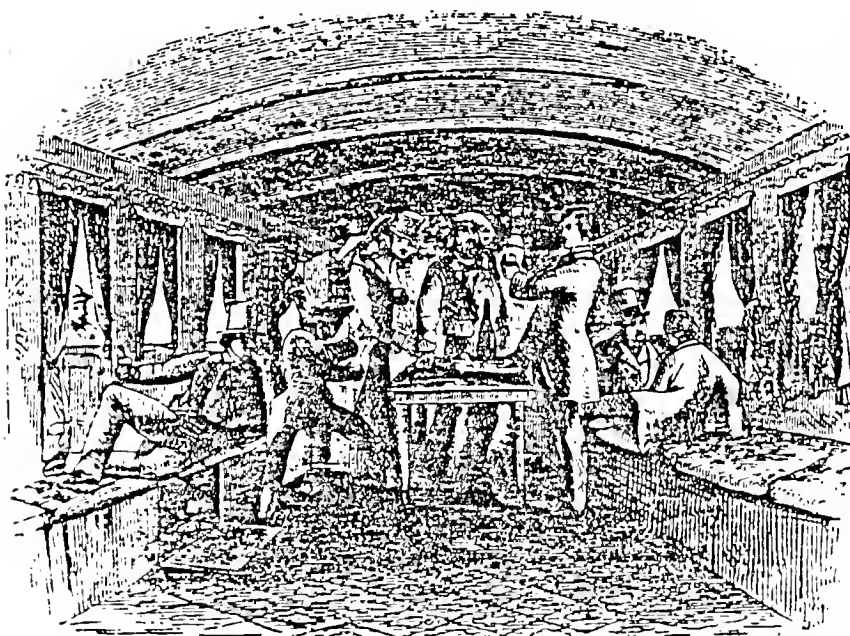
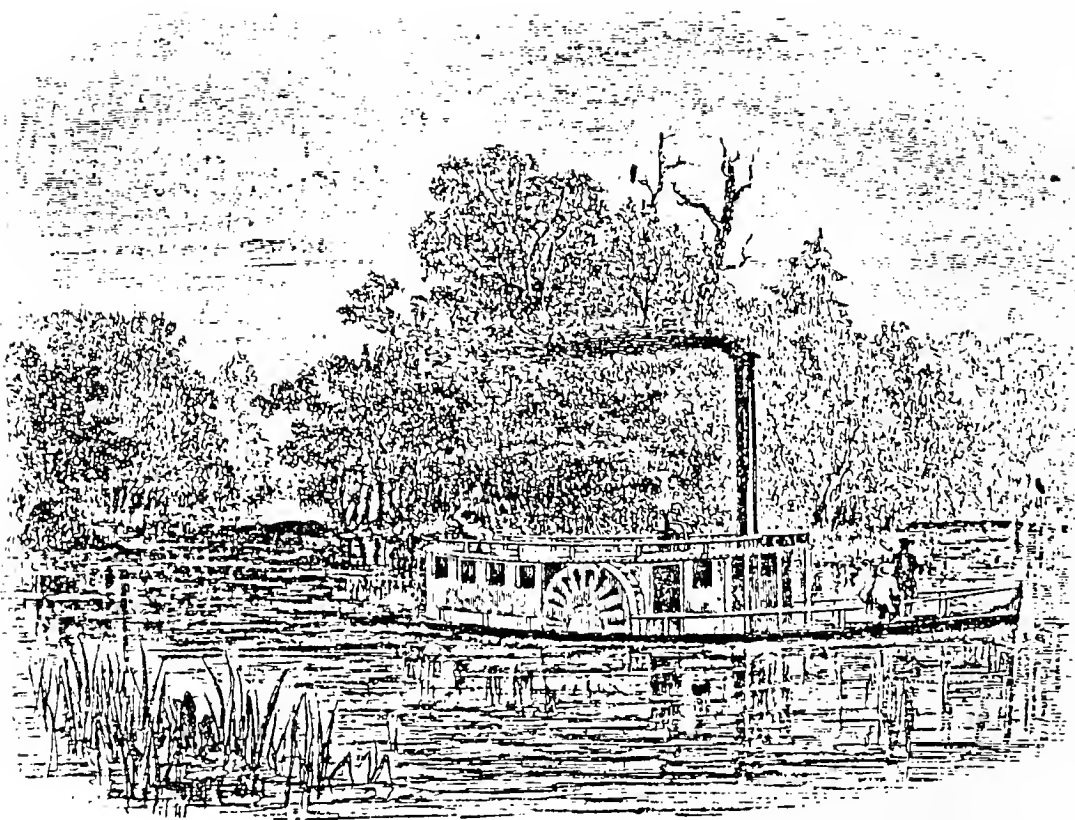
Fig. 17. Steam dredge excavating bogland at the Virginia Cut of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, 1858. Woodcut by Edward C. Bruce, 1859.

effort, the seizing and tearing up of the roots and earth, and finally the slow stretching out of the enormous arm and emptying of its hand -- all moved by the unseen power of steam -- made the whole operation seem as if it was the manual labor of a thinking being and colossal size and inconceivable physical power.

In 1858 another articulate visitor gave a lively report of the canal's progress. Accompanied by several friends, Virginia writer and artist Edward Caledon Bruce took a steamer from Richmond to Norfolk, transferring to a wagon for the 17-mile drive south to the North Landing bridge. Boarding the 50-foot "pony steamboat" Calypso, Bruce's group examined the entire length of the canal. Later, the artist's woodcuts and commentary were published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine. Bruce described in florid detail his rowboat excursion up a mile-and-a-half of the newly completed cut from North Landing.

Our passage thither, if not altogether as imposing as Cleopatra's rows on the Nile, led through a finer colonnade of Nature's architecture than Thebes or Luxor could have matched. Our path was an avenue of water, a hundred feet wide, straight as an arrow, walled in with cypresses of primeval growth, their enormous boles sustaining at the summit a mass of the most delicate, feather-like foliage; the black but perfectly clear water overhung by varieties of flowers, grasses, and shrubs innumerable. The blue flag, the coral honeysuckle, the magnolia-like and richly perfumed blossoms of the laurel [were] conspicuous. Animal life was less profuse. Now and then a moccasin would glide under the shore, or a gray-colored lizard dodge rapidly round a stump. The mocking-bird, its cousin the ubiquitous cat-bird, the blue jay, a stray heron, and--horresco referens--the buzzard--constituted the powers above. The great dredges, brandishing their black arms among the fallen Titans of the wood, and dragging up the remains of long departed vegetable giants, saluting the while, as if in derision, the surviving patriarchs with rapid puffs of steam, contributed more than anything else to give life to the scene. More efficient and powerful pioneers never invaded the virgin wilderness. They work in pairs, one machine a little in advance of its mate. Each cuts a path forty feet wide and eight feet deep, piling up the black chaos of mud and stumps on either hand in long ramparts.

Further work in 1858-59 included dredging the North Landing River (creating a channel about 120 feet wide and ten feet deep) and erecting three swing drawbridges--at Great Neck, North Landing and Coinjock. The canal company also



Figs. 18 and 19. Top: The steamboat Calypso descending the North Landing River. Bottom: Cabin interior of the Calypso. Both woodcuts by Edward C. Bruce, 1859.

acquired several small steamboats, built houses for bridge tenders, and completed the tidal guard lock at Great Bridge. In January 1859, with additional dredging and other improvements still underway, the canal was opened to traffic. Private steamboat lines began offering service later that same year, and within a few months it was obvious the canal would be a commercial success. By July 1860, 1,655 vessels totaling 6,600 tons had passed through the lock at Great Bridge.

The Civil War and Postbellum Era

While previous canal schemes for the Elizabeth River-Currituck Sound route had been scotched because of the Revolution and the War of 1812, the Albemarle and Chesapeake was completed just in time to figure in the Civil War. Shortly after shots rang out at Fort Sumpter in 1861, the Hampton Roads and Albemarle Sound region became a principal theater of war. The Union navy launched a series of attacks against the Outer Banks in late summer, 1861. After taking a devastating bombardment on August 18, Confederate Fort Clarke capitulated, with Ft. Hatteras following the next day. The U.S. Navy soon gained access to North Carolina's inland seas and in February 1862 took the Confederate stronghold of Roanoke Island. With Albemarle Sound open to them, federal gunboats quickly eliminated remaining Confederate naval forces, taking control of the region's key port towns. From the beginning of the war the ACC had been instrumental to the Confederacy, but now southern forces feared an inland assault on Norfolk. Federal forces were equally worried about a possible Confederate attack via the canal, and both sides responded by sinking vessels to block the channel at either end.

For several months the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal lay dormant, useless to either side. On May 9, 1862, however, a powerful federal naval force accepted the

surrender of Norfolk and Portsmouth. Although the Civil War dragged on for three more years, the only further military activity along the Virginia-Carolina coast consisted of sporadic raids staged by southern guerillas. Once both ends of the ACC lay in Union hands, General Burnside ordered the canal cleared and repaired. Indeed, the canal proved a considerable boon the North; records show that during the three-year period of occupation nearly 9,000 craft passed through the waterway.

The Civil War left Princess Anne County, like other areas of the South, in social, economic and political disarray. Recovery was gradual, but the area rebounded in the 1870s and 80s thanks in large part to the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. The postbellum era saw an increase in water trade, as well as the introduction of better farming methods and more diversified crops. Timbering, which had become more mechanized, offered increased employment to a broad social spectrum, as did commercial fishing and waterfowl hunting. The social landscape changed too as newly freed blacks established their own farms, communities and churches.

The Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal emerged from the war largely undamaged, though most of its equipment--lighters, dredges, pumps and steam tugs--had been destroyed. Strong commercial demand following the war immediately resurrected the company's fortunes. Marshall Parks, once again president of the ACC, reported record earnings of \$41,000 in toll fees for the year ending September 30, 1866. By that time, several steamboat services had established regular freight schedules along the route. Parks was instrumental in encouraging use of the inland water route between New York and Carolina. Owing to a deal he negotiated with the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and the Delaware and Raritan Canal, boats passing through the ACC were obliged to pay only half fare on the northern waterways.

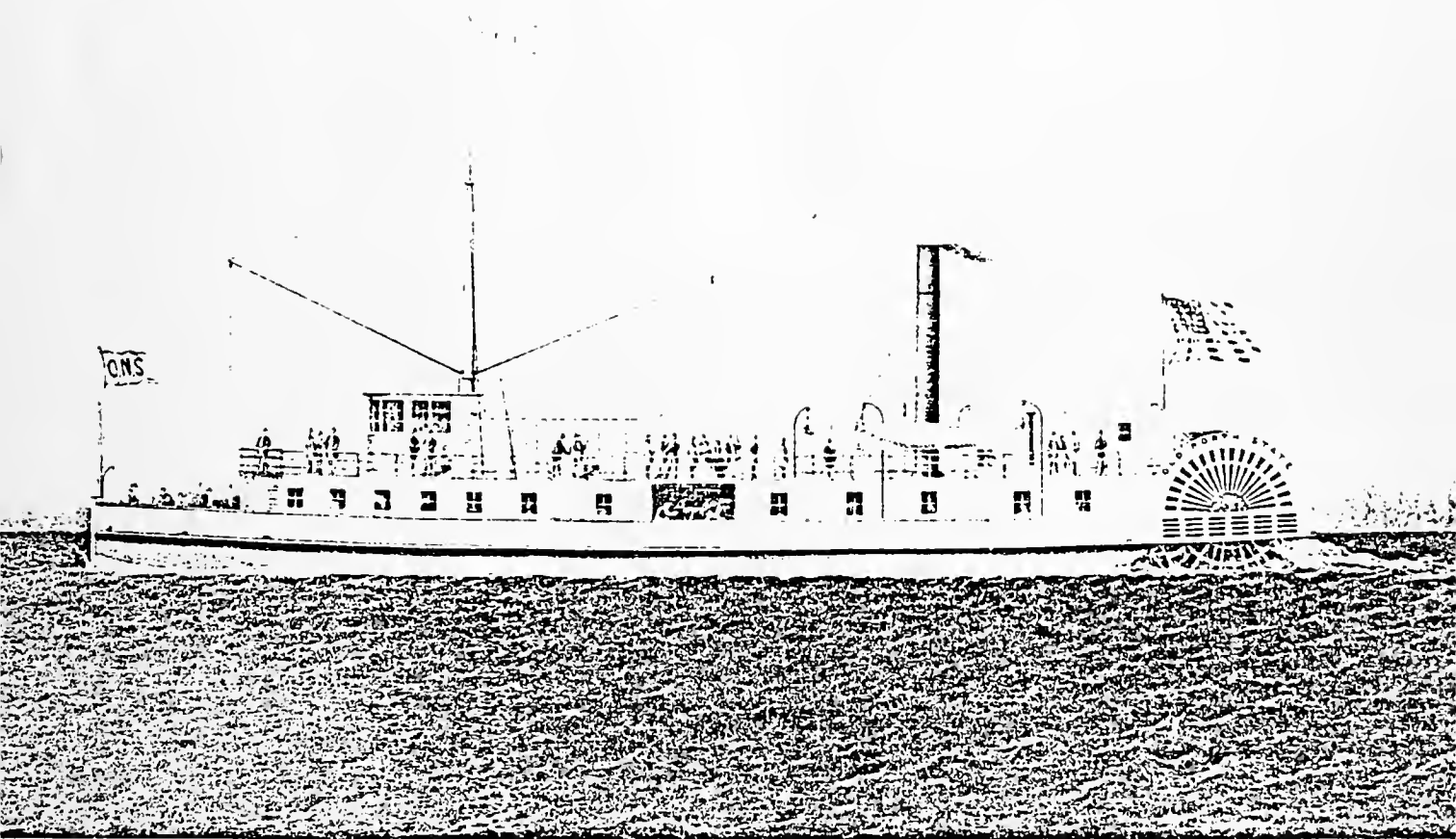


Fig. 20. The metal-clad stern-wheel steamer Old North State, built expressly for travel through the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. From a mid-19th century lithograph by Endicott & Company.

Soon after the war, large passenger steamers began using the canal. One of the first was the Old North State, a 135-foot-long stern wheeler offering weekly service between Norfolk and Washington, N.C. The boat had a freight capacity of 200 tons, and was equipped with "ten finely fitted up staterooms, and accommodations for 26 passengers." A year or two later, the newly formed Old Dominion Line began offering freight and passenger service between New York and Norfolk, operating a fleet of smaller feeder steamers from Norfolk to port towns in Carolina.

The Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal enjoyed a steadily increasing business in the late 1860s and 1870s. Its Sixteenth Annual Report enumerated the major commodities passing through its waters. These included "large quantities of cotton, salt, fish, turpentine, lumber, shingles, staves, railroad ties, wood, juniper logs, bacon, peas and beans, wheat, fresh shad, watermelons, etc. Forest products of timber amounted to over 60 million feet of board measure."

One vessel in 1868 was equipped for "carrying fish alive from the sounds to northern markets." Another steamer, the Gazelle, carried a party of New York sportsman on a "ducking excursion." Duck hunting had become an increasingly popular middle-class diversion, but professional hunting was also an important part of the local economy, and one steamer, appropriately named Cygnet, regularly carried barrels of waterfowl bound for Philadelphia and other northern cities.

The opening of new navigation systems in North Carolina in the 1870s provided a continuous inland waterway from the Cape Fear River to Norfolk. With it came ever increasing shipments of southern cotton. The number of vessels passing through the ACC rose steadily from 3,636 in 1866 to 6,854 in 1880. Of the 1880

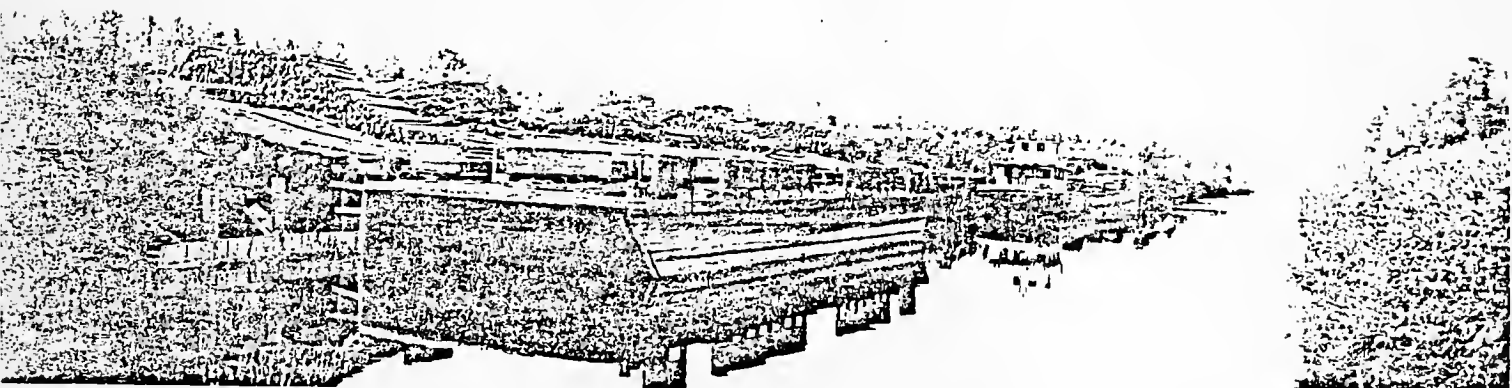
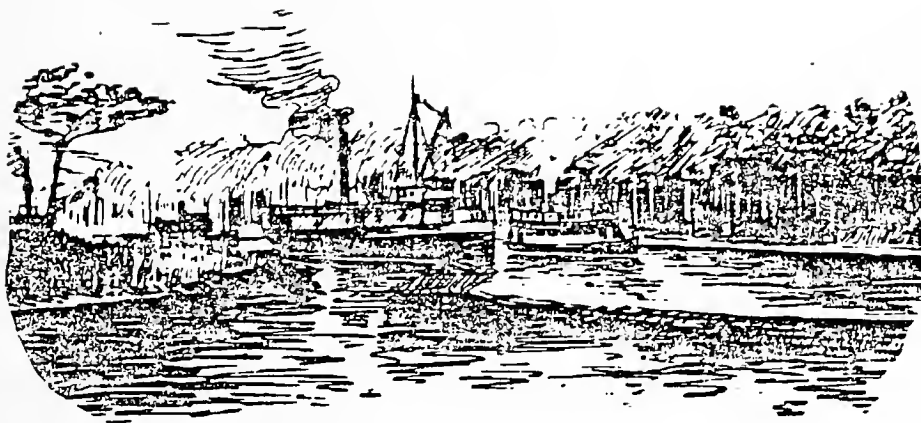


Fig. 21 and 22. Top: A log raft blockade on the North Landing River. Woodblock illustration of 1892 by Samuel Ward Stanton. Bottom: The pulpwood barge Richmond Cedar Works No. 2 on the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal near Camden Mills, ca. 1905.



Figs. 23 and 24. Two North Landing area farmhouses showing the range in form and size of dwellings built for prosperous farm families in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Top: The House at Oak Grove, near Blackwater, currently abandoned and in bad repair, is unusually large for the area, showing the influences of various late 19th-century styles. Bottom: The Malbone House near Pleasant Ridge is a typical "I-house" of the postbellum era, having a central passage, end chimneys and a one-story rear kitchen wing.

total, 3,289 were steamers and 1,537 were schooners, with the balance being roughly divided among sloops, barges, lighters and rafts.

A relatively small part of this traffic carried strictly local produce. No towns or villages grew up along the canal in Princess Anne County during this period. The settlement known since the 18th century as North Landing, for example, was described in the 1870s as "a place of no very great commercial importance, being simply a suburb of Roper City." (Roper City was a short-lived community surrounding a large steam sawmill complex named for its owner, entrepreneur John L. Roper, formerly of Pennsylvania.)

Farm life in the North Landing River region of Princess Anne County changed gradually in the last third of the 19th century. Farms were less self-sufficient than before the Civil War, being more closely tied to the market economy. Most blacks farmed their own parcels, but some, together with whites, worked as tenants. Crops were more diverse, and farming methods were more efficient due to mechanization. The North Landing region was still something of a backwater, but it was not so isolated as it might have been without the Albemarle and Chesapeake. The canal brought not only outside goods, but also visitors, newspapers and outside ideas. It contributed significantly to the region's modest prosperity, which was evidenced by an increasing number of substantial farmhouses built in the area in the late 19th century.

A number of these stand today, including the Keely House (1880) on West Neck Creek, and the House at Oak Grove (ca. 1900) near Blackwater. As elsewhere in tidewater Virginia, the "I-house" (a two-story, single-room-deep, central-passage-plan form) became the predominant house type for prosperous farm

INLAND NAVIGATION.

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TO

NORTH CAROLINA AND THE SOUTH,

BY CANALS AND INLAND NAVIGATION FOR STEAMBOATS, SAILING
VESSELS, RAFTS, &c., AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF HAT-
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SAVING TIME AND INSURANCE.



DIMENSIONS OF CANALS AND LOCKS:

CANALS.	MILES.	LOCKS		
		Length Feet.	Width Feet.	Depth Feet.
Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal	14	220	40	7
Chesapeake and Delaware Canal	14	220	24	9
Delaware and Raritan Canal	43	220	24	7
Erie, of New York	315	110	18	7

Light that steamers bound to Charleston, Savannah, Florida and the West Indies take this route.

Steam tug-boats leave Norfolk, towing sail vessels, barges, rafts, &c., to and from North Carolina to Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York.

Freight steamers leave Norfolk for the following places: Edenton, Elizabeth City, Hertford, Plymouth, Jamesville, Williamston, Hamilton, Hills Ferry, Palmyra, Scotland Neck, Halifax, Weblon, Columbia, Fair Field, Windsor, Winton, Gatesville, Murfreesboro, Franklin, Currituck, Comstock, Roanoke Island, Washington, Greenville, Tallapoosa, Indianatown, Bay River and Newberne.

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President Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Co., Norfolk, Va.

Fig. 25. Late 19th-century advertisement for the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, noting the number of miles to major destinations, and listing other ports of call served by connecting steamers. In the 1890s it was possible to travel from North Carolina to the Great Lakes (via the Erie and other canals) without ever having to venture into the Atlantic Ocean.

families. Poorer families--including tenants--generally lived in single-story, two- or three-room houses of frame construction. Few if any of these modest dwellings survive in the area today. Ambitiously stylish houses were uncommon, even by the 1890s, judging from the few surviving dwellings displaying complex massing and ornament.

While the late 19th century was a moderately prosperous era for the North Landing region as a whole, it was a boom period for the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. Despite the introduction of railroads to the Hampton Roads-Albemarle Sound region during this period, ships plying the ACC rose steadily from 3,636 in 1866 to 6,854 in 1880. By 1890, the canal's peak year, over 400,000 tons of freight passed through its waters. While freight represented the bulk of shipping on the Albemarle and Chesapeake, the postbellum era was also the heyday of passenger steamers on the canal.

Leading steamship lines included the Albemarle Steam Navigation Company and the Old Dominion Line, both having established regular routes on the canal in the 1870s. The number of passenger ships on the waterway gradually increased until the 1880s, after the Norfolk Southern Railroad opened a line from Norfolk to Elizabeth City and Edenton. A second rail line completed in 1898 from Norfolk to Munden Point at the mouth of the North Landing River drastically reduced the need for passenger boats on the canal, but a few smaller passenger steamers continued to use the canal until the 1920s.

The experience of riding a steamship through the ACC was described in detail by New York maritime writer Samuel Ward Stanton. Making the 225-mile round trip between Norfolk and New Bern in February 1892, he published an account of his

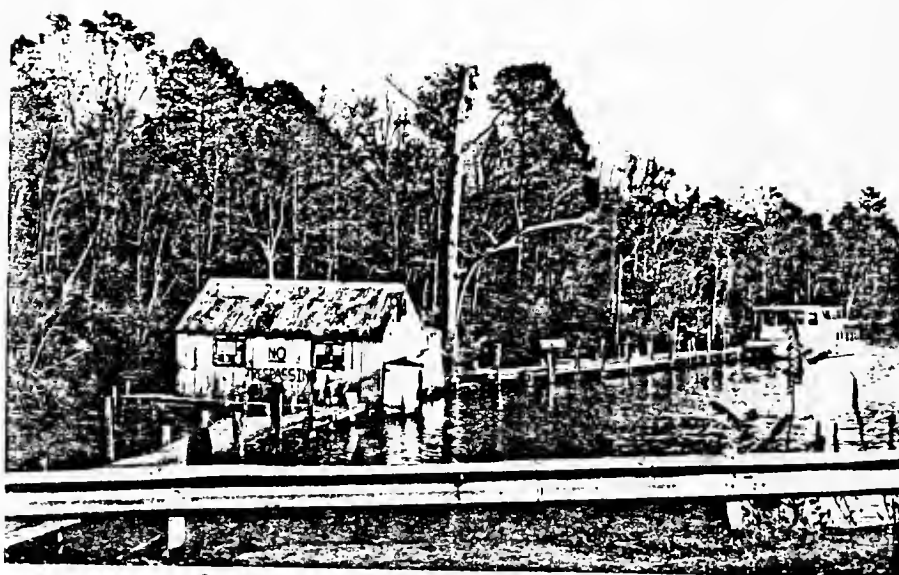


Fig. 26 and 27. Two recent autumn views of the North Landing River at North Landing. Top: A pleasure craft approaches the North Landing drawbridge, built in 1951. Bottom: A view from the road shows a boathouse and the wall of tall trees lining the river. In some respects, views along the river have changed little since 1892, when Samuel Ward Stanton traveled the waterway from Norfolk.

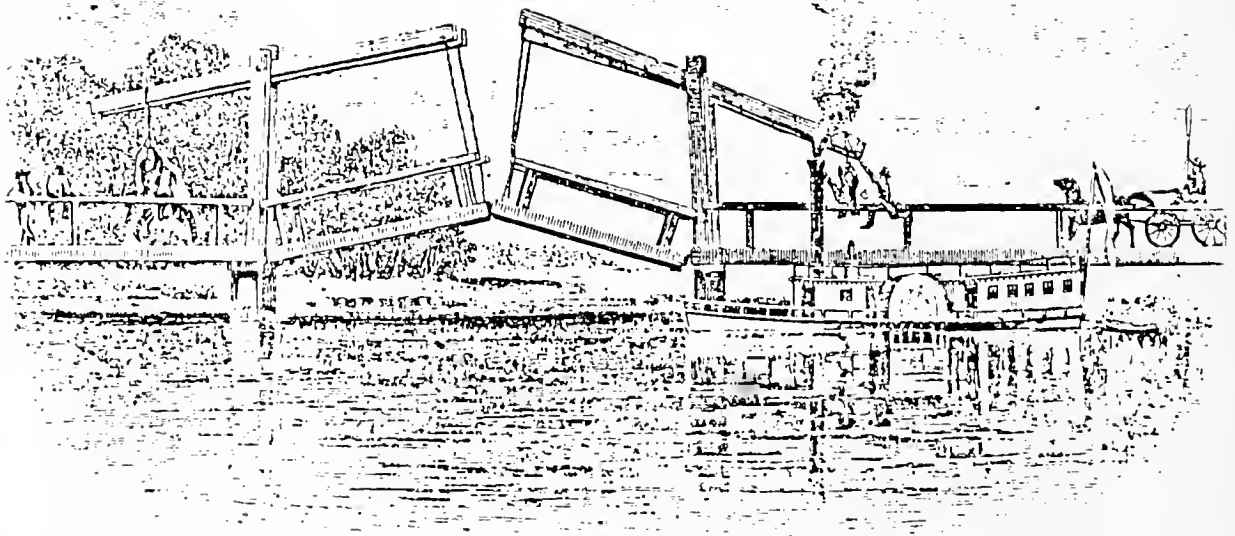
journey in a two-part article for Seaboard Magazine. The writer boarded the propellor steamer Newberne at Norfolk the night before departure. The ship left its dock "at the unearthly hour of four"[AM], and Stanton did not wake until after daybreak, shortly before the ship was about to leave the Virginia Cut and enter the North Landing River.

When I left my stateroom on the Newberne the morning after I had gone aboard, I found that we were in the canal, passing eastward through a forest of cypress and juniper. The sun had just arisen, and the decks were sparkling where its rays touched the dew upon them. We were passing along a cut in the forest which was so straight that the end of it was lost in the distance. Far ahead a tug was coming, towing a schooner, and the steam from her exhaust pipe reflected the water....

There are very few cultivated spots on the canal after leaving Great Bridge where the lock is situated. For ten miles the steamer passes through a vast, unbroken forest, the tall straight trees of which stand like sentinels, so still are they. The ground beyond the bank of the canal is low and marshy, and is covered with a low mass of tangled vines, which are part of the time in water. All is still and dismal. The occasional cry of a bird is the only sound that disturbs the stillness of this mournful region.

Stanton's characterization of the watery wilderness along the canal cut as "dismal" and "mournful" was a convention of the day; moreover, it will be recalled that he was traveling in February when the forest was brown and gray. After leaving the Virginia Cut, the Newberne passed the settlement of North Landing, a the head of the North Landing River. Stanton remarked that "There are few houses to be seen at North Landing. The canal company keeps a tollhouse here." Stanton's description of the natural scenery along North Landing River closely matches that found today.

The trip down North Landing River is as an enjoyable one as could be imagined. The upper part of the river is narrow and crooked and the banks low. The latter are covered for the most part with a dense growth of cypress, juniper, gum and cedar. Here and there is seen a cleared spot, but the deserted, rude dwelling upon it tells its tale only too well. There are a number of these "starvation plantations" along North Landing River....We passed the Comet, a stern-wheel boat bound for Norfolk, about ten O'clock....The river soon began to widen and there are long stretches of meadow covered with short saw grass, back of which



Figs. 28 and 29. Top: A sailboat passes just downstream from the present swing drawbridge at Pungo Ferry. This November 1987 photo shows the wide marshes bordering the river at this point. In 1892 Stanton wrote that Pungo was a small community of about ten dwellings. Today, instead of houses, a boat ramp and large new multi-use pavillion stands just north of the bridge on the east bank of the river. Bottom: The "new" wooden drawbridge crossing the North Landing River at Pungo Ferry, 1858. Woodcut by Edward C. Bruce, 1859.

lie dreary forests of pine. There are no habitations in sight and the steamer courses her way around bend after bend.

The last community Stanton described along the North Landing River was Pungo Ferry, today the site of a swing-span drawbridge and a boat launch. Like North Landing, the place was larger in the 19th century. Stanton writes: "Pungo ferry was passed during the morning. It consists of about ten houses on either side of the river, and an old flatboat for ferrying horses or passengers across the river lies moored to a stake on one side."

Less than a decade after Stanton's voyage aboard the Newberne, railroads had drastically reduced regularly scheduled passenger service on the canal. In 1896 a new 22-mile-long branch of the Virginia Beach and Southern Railroad was completed from Euclid, a stop along the Norfolk-Virginia Beach line, to Munden Point in southern Princess Anne at the head of Currituck Sound. There, near the mouth of the North Landing River, the railroad company built a steamboat wharf to serve traffic in the Carolina sounds.

While a railroad linking Norfolk to Elizabeth City and Edenton had been built west of the ACC (and east of the Dismal Swamp Canal) in the 1870s, this was the first direct rail link between Norfolk and the Currituck region. Perishable products such as vegetables or waterfowl could now be sent quickly to Hampton Roads, bypassing the slowest and most constricted parts of the canal, including the upper reaches of the North Landing River and the Virginia Cut. Two years later, in 1890, the fledgling railway was absorbed into the rapidly expanding Norfolk and Southern, which established its own fleet of boats at Munden to serve the Carolina sounds.

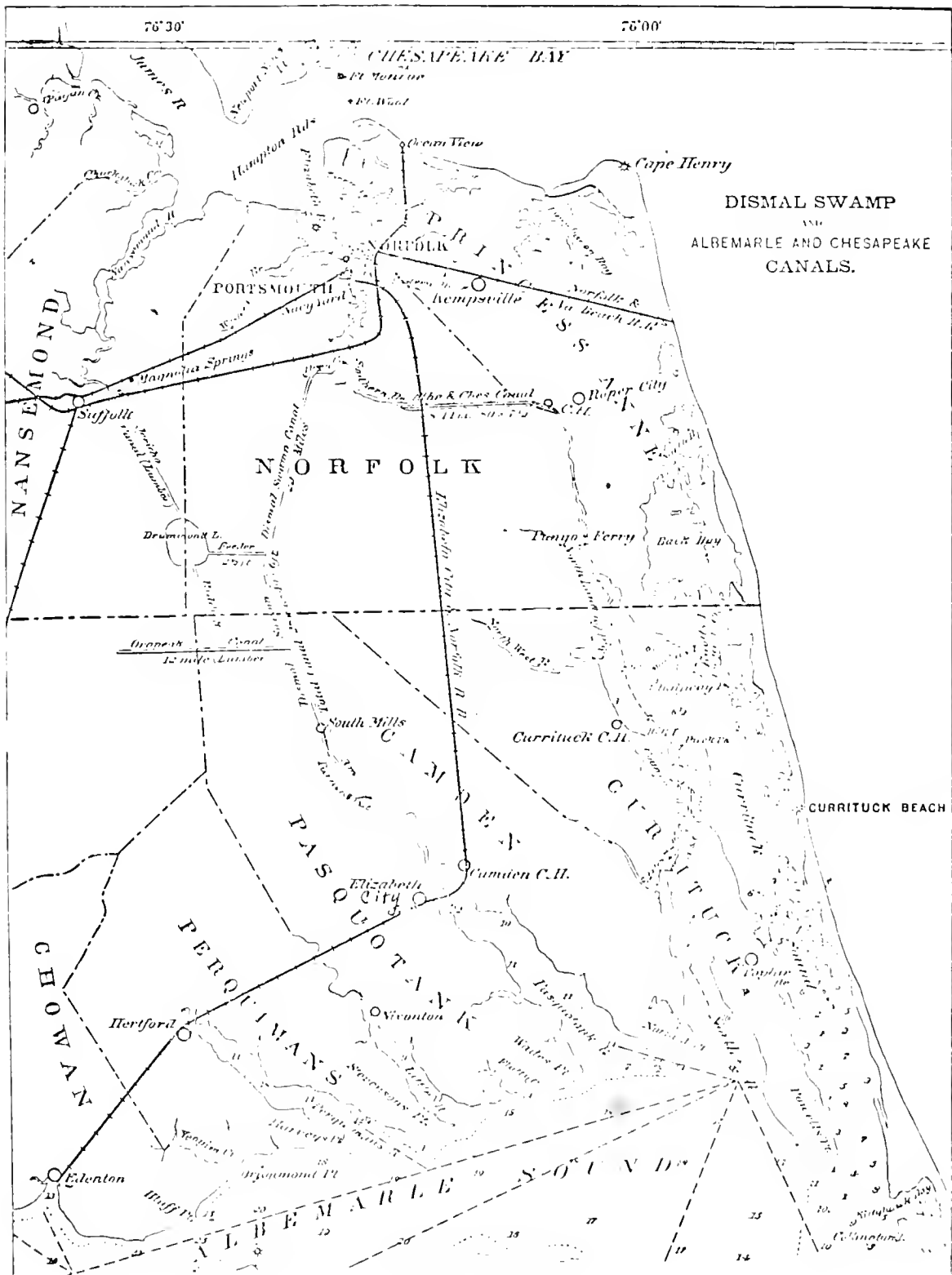


Fig. 30. This late-19th century map from T. C. Purdy's "Report on the Canals of the United States" shows several rail lines connecting to Norfolk, including the Elizabeth City & Norfolk Railroad and the Norfolk and Virginia Beach Railroad. The Albemarle and Chesapeake and Dismal Swamp canals are clearly delineated. Pungo Ferry is also labeled, as is Princess Anne Courthouse and nearby Roper City, a temporary logging settlement.

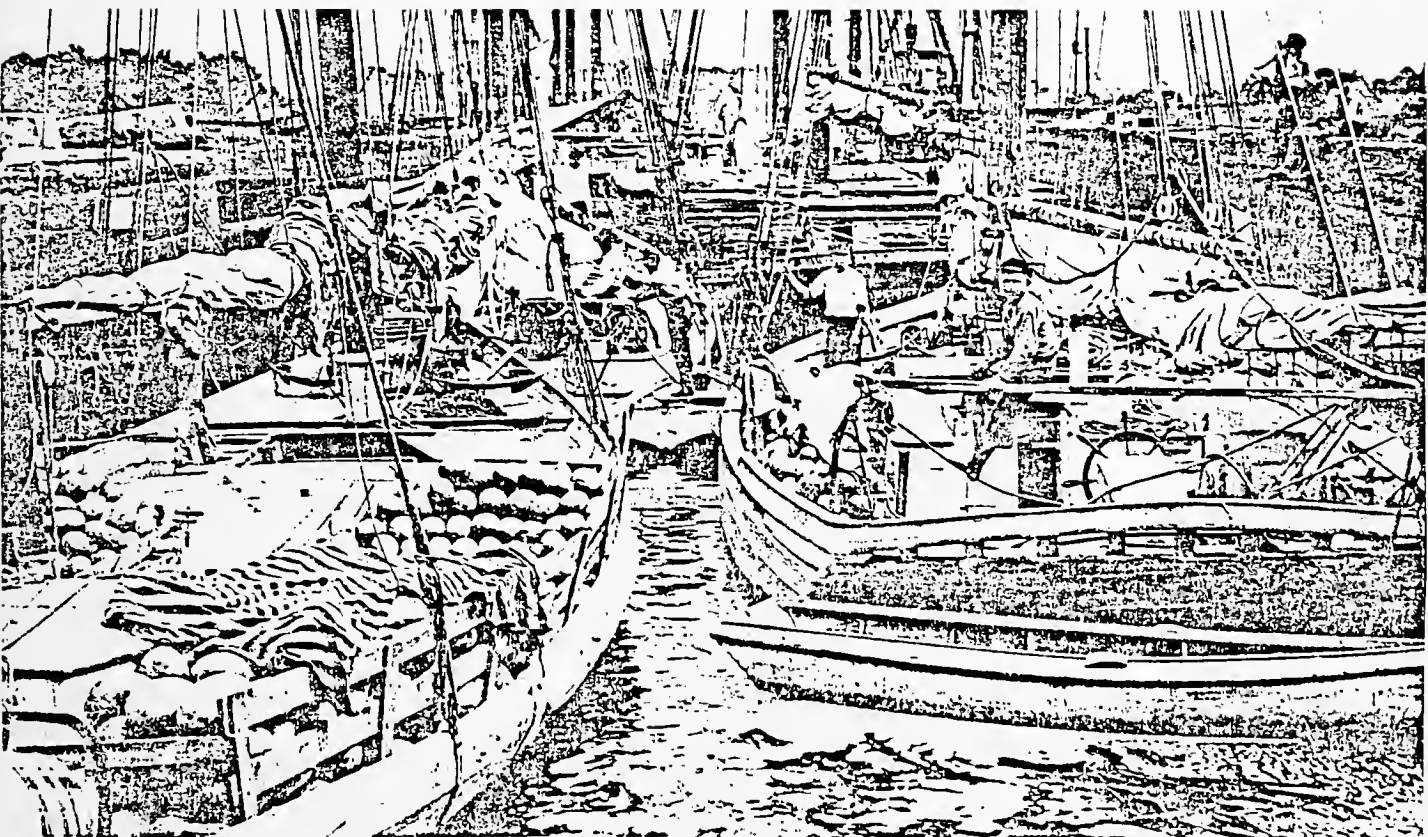


Fig. 31. A late 19th or early 20th-century view of sailing vessels loaded with watermelons at a lock on the Dismal Swamp Canal. Both the ACC and DSC carried similar products, but the DSC was the preferred route for most shippers after completion of major improvements to the canal in 1899.

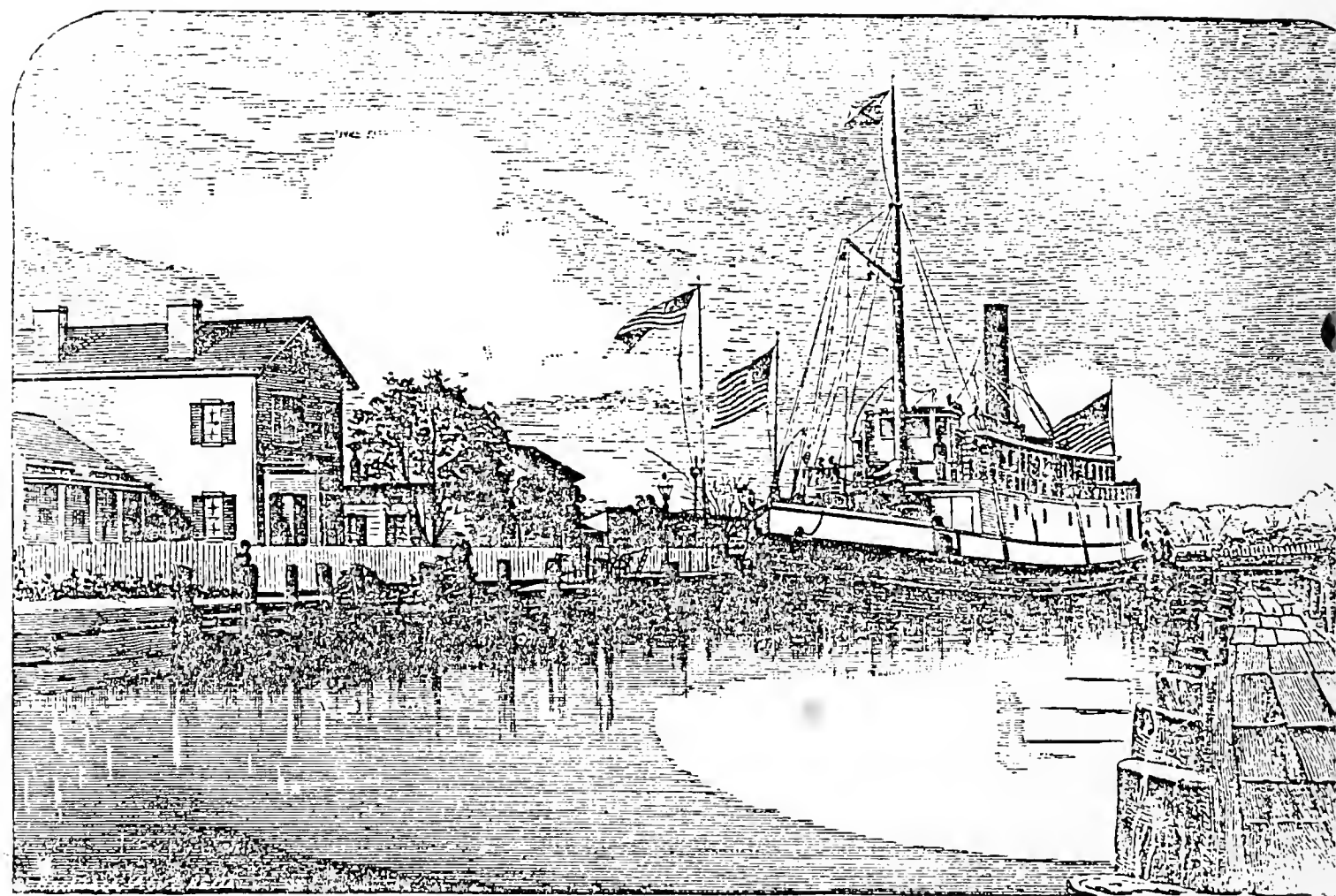


Fig. 32. An 1890s engraving of the steamer Newberne in the heyday of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal. Only a decade later ACC revenues fell sharply due to stiff competition from the railroads and the newly improved Dismal Swamp Canal. The federal government purchased the ACC in 1912 and developed it to serve as a link in the toll-free Intracoastal Waterway.

These developments administered the coup de grace to the Albemarle and Chesapeake, which was already suffering from stiff competition with the recently upgraded Dismal Swamp Canal. By the 1910s, better roads and the introduction of trucks and automobiles speeded the demise of the canal. Even though boats could carry larger loads and often ply a more direct route, the greater speed of land transportation eventually won out.

The Twentieth Century

While the first years of the new century marked the decline and failure of the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Company, they did not spell the end of the waterway itself; rather, it ushered in a new era for the canal as a link in the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. Similarly, wholesale urbanization of the city of Virginia Beach in the second half of the century did not spell--or has not yet spelled--the end of the North Landing basin as a region of large farms interspersed with largely uninhabited stretches of swamp, marsh and woodland.

Since the 19th century various branches of the federal government had proposed schemes for creating a continuous inland waterway along the Atlantic coast. In 1904 the issue was revived after a U. S. Lifesaving Service report advocated digging a deep channel from Norfolk to Beaufort Inlet, N.C., that would accommodate oceangoing vessels and thus reduce the risk of shipwrecks along the treacherous Carolina coast. Subsequent investigations by the Army Corps of Engineers considered several alternate routes through Virginia, including one incorporating the Dismal Swamp and Albemarle and Chesapeake canals. Detailed cost analyses of four different routes between Albemarle Sound and Hampton Roads were carried out between 1905 and 1910 as the government became increasingly committed to building a toll-free waterway along the Atlantic coast.

In 1910, facing drastically reduced toll receipts (freight had dropped from 403,000 tons in 1890 to 95,000 tons in 1906), the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal Company defaulted on payments to its bondholders. The company's assets were sold at an auction that November, and the winning bidder organized a new company whose purpose clearly was to maintain the canal only long enough to sell it to the federal government. Indeed, earlier that year a congressional act had authorized Secretary of War Henry C. Stimson to purchase either the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal or the Dismal Swamp Canal as part of a federally-operated inland waterway.

The die was cast in 1911 when the new owners of the ACC (renamed the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal Company) offered the canal to the government for \$500,000. This relatively low price made the ACC clearly the most economical route, and in 1912 a purchase contract was signed by Secretary of War Stimson. Congress ratified the contract the following year and appropriated \$800,000 in funds for improvements to the canal.

Acquisition of the canal by the U. S. government was generally welcomed by the Norfolk business community and the public at large, who saw that a toll-free and much improved waterway as a boon to regional trade. Over the next seven years, the Army Corps spent roughly four million dollars widening and deepening the waterway and rebuilding bridges and other facilities. By 1920, after removing 1½ million cubic yards of material from the canal, the waterway boasted a constant depth of twelve feet and a bottom width of ninety feet. Meanwhile, similar improvements were made to other segments of the waterway south of Albemarle Sound.

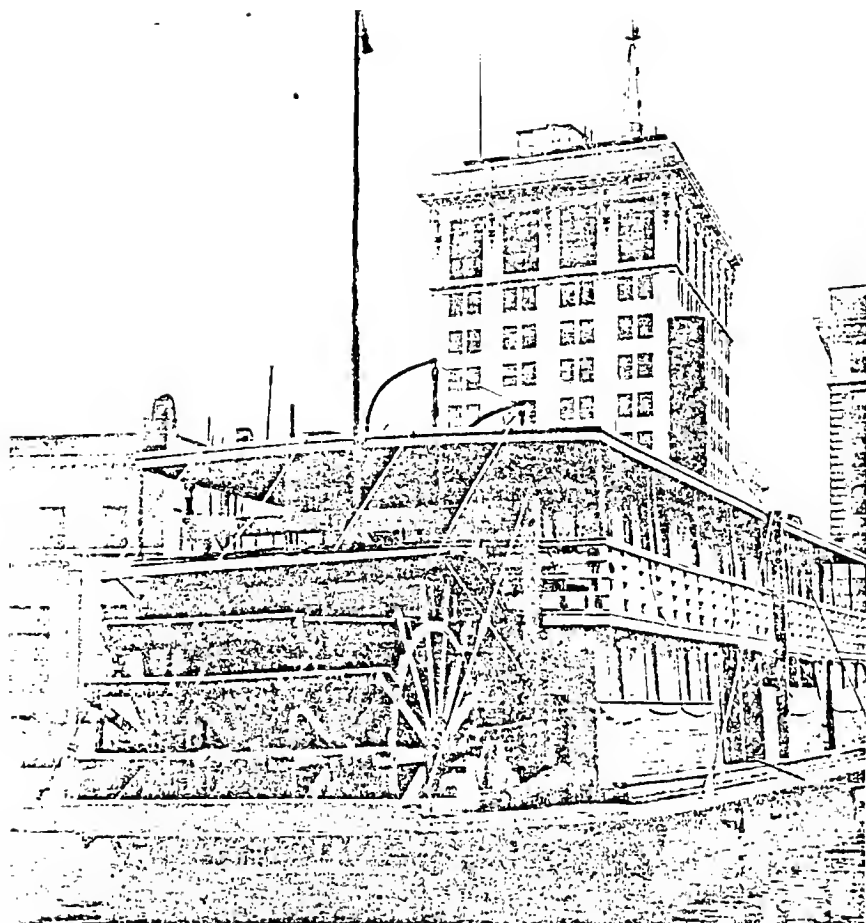


Fig. 33. A 1930 view of the stern-wheel steamer Currituck moored at Norfolk. Built in 1916 and retired in 1931, the Currituck was the last regularly scheduled passenger steamer playing the ACC.

With tolls lifted and the channel deepened, use of the canal rose gradually year by year. Vessels ranged in size from oceangoing freighters to small pleasure craft, and included schooners, towboats, barges, scows, tankers, dredgers and military vessels. Small passenger steamboats continued to make the run to isolated villages in Currituck Sound until the late 1920s. One of the more unusual vessels plying the waterway in the 1920s and 30s was a showboat bringing entertainment to small communities in the Albemarle Sound region.

The last steamer to use the Albemarle and Chesapeake portion of the inland waterway was the Currituck, a 105-foot, wood-hulled stern-wheeler built at Norfolk in 1916. At the time of her final runs, the Currituck departed downtown Norfolk at 8 P.M. three days a week. Reaching Knott's Island at the Carolina border around 5 A.M., she finished her run at Poplar Branch, N.C. at around 9 O'clock in the morning, depending on the traffic and weather. The Depression finally put the Currituck out of business in 1931.

Up through the first quarter of this century, commercial fishing and hunting played a significant role in the economy of the North Landing River region. Back Bay, a large shallow sound lying just inside the Atlantic barrier islands to the east of the North Landing basin, had supported a thriving fishing industry (based mainly on bass and white perch) in the last decades of the 19th century. By 1900, the region's marshlands, strategically situated along the Atlantic flyway, had taken on a new identity as a waterfowler's paradise. Commercial hunters flourished in the area until the mid 1920s, when conservation-minded legislators outlawed market gunning.



Fig. 34. Early 1920s photograph showing several members and guides of the Pellitory Gunning Club, located near Creeds. Like many other area gun clubs of the period, the Pellitory attracted mainly well-to-do Northern businessmen.

As commercial hunting and fishing declined, sport shooting and fishing enjoyed increased popularity. In the early part of this century, the North Landing River basin and nearby Back Bay became prime destinations for northern businessmen seeking to escape the pressures and constraints of city life. Private gunning clubs built large and often luxurious clubhouses along tidal creeks, bays and inlets. Geese and ducks--mainly canvasbacks and readheads--were the main quarry, but sportsmen also sought sora rail and other waterfowl. Scores of local men earned seasonal employment as hunting guides, while others rented out boats, blinds and cabins. By the 1930s and 40s, area hunting facilities--including a number of elaborate clubhouses and shooting lodges--represented an investment of some five million dollars.

Because its economy was based mainly on agriculture, the North Landing region weathered the Depression somewhat better than other areas of the state. The forties brought economic recovery and unparalleled growth to the area. Unlike World War I, which had no direct impact on the area except for increasing canal traffic, the Second World War generated a hum of activity. Norfolk, having the largest concentration of naval facilities in the nation, entered a boom era of construction and development, Fort Story, near Cape Henry, doubled in size, and the Army expanded facilities at Camp Pendleton. In 1943, two years after the U. S. entered the war, the Oceana Naval Air Station was established on a several-hundred-acre tract between the courthouse and Lynnhaven Bay. Later, Fentress U. S. Navy Reserve Base was built just west of the North Landing River near Mt. Pleasant crossroads.

Throughout the war, German submarines prowled the Atlantic Coast (the Outer Banks received the grim nickname "Torpedo Junction"), and Virginia Beach residents witnessed the sinking of Allied vessels as close as four miles offshore. As a consequence, coastline shipping was diverted to the Intracoastal Waterway. Traffic on the old ACC portion of the Intracoastal Waterway rose dramatically to more than one million tons of freight annually from 1941-45.

Following the war, northern Princess Anne County experienced phenomenal growth due largely to the Navy's expanded presence in Hampton Roads. Between 1930 to 1950, the county's population jumped from 16,000 to 42,000, but most of it was concentrated in the areas adjacent to Norfolk and the resort town of Virginia Beach. Population in the southern part of the county actually decreased as many farm families left the land. As elsewhere in Virginia, farm mechanization increased productivity while decreasing the demand for labor. Prosperous farmers tended to enlarge their operations, while marginal farmers sold out to their more successful neighbors and headed for the shipyards and factories of Hampton Roads. Farm consolidation left its mark on the landscape: many small farmsteads, including some that had operated continuously since the 18th and 19th centuries, disappeared. Little new housing, moreover, was built to replace them.

The resort town of Virginia Beach gained the status of "Second-Class City" in 1952. The Norfolk-Virginia Beach region's population continued to climb and in 1962 the City of Norfolk annexed thirteen square miles of Princess Anne County with a population of 30,000. Facing threat of further annexations, the City of Virginia Beach and Princess Anne County, having shared a long history of close political ties, took advantage of 1960 state legislation allowing the merger of counties with adjacent cities. Voters approved the merger in January 1962, and

the following year the City of Virginia Beach officially expanded its boundaries to include 310 square miles of Princess Anne County. Population jumped from 8,000 to 130,000, and the city immediately became the ninth largest in area and eighteenth in population in the United States.

Since then, growth has continued unabated. In the 1980s, with a population of over 300,000, Virginia Beach became the largest municipality in the state, surpassing its rival Norfolk. Presently, the entire northern half of the county is urbanized, and new development continues to march southward at a rapid pace. So far, the line of intense development lies north of Princess Anne Courthouse. Today the North Landing River basin remains primarily agricultural, with only a few small housing tracts and roadside strip housing at its northern perimeter around Princess Anne Courthouse and Fentress airfield.

The undeveloped southern portion of Virginia Beach--which includes the North Landing River basin as well as the Back Bay area to the east--has become more precious than ever, not just as potential territory for further urban development, but equally as a refuge from urban sprawl.

Realizing the importance of preserving the area's natural heritage, the City of Chesapeake, adjoining Virginia Beach on the east, established the largely wilderness Northwest River Park in 1973. The City of Norfolk maintains some wooded and marshy openland in the form of Stumpy Lake Golf Course a few hundred yards west of the North Landing River along Indian River road. Within Virginia Beach, the city's Munden Point Park near the mouth of the North Landing River provides public access to the river as well as a large area of unspoiled woodland.

Perhaps most important to the region, however, are the various state and federal wildlife management areas encircling Back Bay, a 60,000-acre sound defined on the east by a narrow spit of land along the Atlantic and on the west by a wider neck of land bordering the North Landing River. The best known of these reserves is the Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, a series of marshy islands together with a four-mile neck of land along the ocean. This is complemented by the Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge at the southern end of the bay along the North Carolina border. State wildlife refuges include the five-mile-long False Cape State Park, together the Barbours Hill Wildlife Management Area along the Atlantic coast, and the smaller Pocahontas Wildlife Area and the Trojan Waterfowl Management Area on the inland side of the bay. Most of this government-managed land is maintained in a completely natural state, with public access carefully limited.

More recently, in 1987, the state's Division of Parks and Recreation, supported by the City of Virginia Beach and other interested parties, recommended that the portion of the North Landing River south of Indian River Road, together with its tributaries the Pocaty River, Blackwater Creek and West Neck Creek, be included in the Virginia Scenic Rivers System. The Scenic Rivers Act, passed by the General Assembly in 1970, provides enabling legislation encouraging state, local and federal agencies as well as riparian landowners to protect the river and its environs. As one of the largest tidal river systems so designated in Virginia, the North Landing River basin should prove to be an increasingly valuable resource to south Hampton Roads. Already the river system is extensively used for swimming, canoeing, pleasure boating, sport fishing, hunting and other recreational activities. Too, the North Landing River Navigation--together with the nearby Dismal Swamp canal--serves as the main conduit for the thousands of pleasure craft passing yearly between Florida and New England along the Intracoastal Waterway.

Today the North Landing River area is poised on the brink of potentially radical change. Located at the southeastern edge of an economically vibrant metropolitan area of well over a million people, the region is ripe for development in the coming decades. Protected in some small measure by the presence of several federal military reservations and by its low-lying terrain interlaced by marshland and waterways, the area could develop in a relatively slow and careful fashion with enlightened zoning and other preservation measures. Today the North Landing navigation continues to carry private and commercial water traffic in an unspoiled setting as it has for over three centuries, and the surrounding farmland still retains the ambience of an earlier era, with its numerous churches, farmsteads and crossroads hamlets recalling the area's long agricultural history. Sandwiched between the famous Dismal Swamp on the west and the environmentally significant Back Bay region on the east, the North Landing area can continue to provide an enriching counterpoint to the nearby urban complex of Hampton Roads.

Fig. 35. A view of Lake Drummond, a shallow 3-mile-wide lake at the center of the Dismal Swamp. Fed only by rainwater, the lake drains outward into surrounding marshes and the Dismal Swamp Canal. Cypress trees, characterized by their exposed roots or "knees," thrive in the wetlands of southeastern Virginia. The North Landing River basin and its tributaries were once lined with tall cypresses, but older specimens, like those pictured here, have by and large been logged out. With stricter conservation, majestic trees like these could gradually reappear along the streams of the North Landing River system.



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